

Buzz King
buzz@BuzzKing.com
BuzzKing.com
303 437 7419

Acts 2:37-39, English Standard Version.

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Baptized with the Holy Spirit.

Early in Acts, we read about Jesus giving an order to the Apostles. Jesus has risen from the dead, and during a forty-day period, he visits them:

4 And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, "you heard from me; 5 for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

This is a very different form of baptism, not one where water is used to symbolize repentance, cleansing, and a new life in God, but rather, one that comes at some point after a water baptism. It doesn't happen to all believers, but we all have the potential to be baptized in this special way. We have already responded to God's grace working within us, and we have accepted Jesus Christ as our personal Messiah. Formally or informally, we have been baptized with water. Now, though,

we are being baptized with the Holy Spirit. We are going through another change – one where we accept not just God’s grace, and not just salvation. The Holy Spirit will empower us to have a level of faith that we would never have before dreamed we could obtain. It’s not just the Apostles who have access to this second baptism. We all do. It’s a matter of whether we act on the opportunity that God gives us.

There are 28 chapters in Acts. For the first 8 chapters, the story focuses on the Apostles, along with a couple of members of “the 7”, men that the Apostles select to help them in their church building efforts, as they develop the Jerusalem Church. Their names are Stephen, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus. These are ordinary people, brand new believers, filled with the Spirit. Originally, they sign up to simply help administer the new Church, initially by helping provide food to needy widows. But some of them will do great things. They appear at this critical juncture in time for a very powerful reason: to show us that God employs all people in the effort to grow and strengthen the Church.

Peter plays a primary evangelistic role in Jerusalem, along with John, the author of a Gospel. The Apostles have the Holy Spirit descend upon them as tongues of fire. They preach and they perform healing miracles. One of the seven ordinary helpers becomes the first Christian martyr: Stephen is stoned to death. Then some of the Apostles are arrested by the religious authorities. We read:

27 And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest questioned them, 28 saying, "We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man's blood upon us." 29 But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than men."

In Chapter 8, we meet Saul. At first, he approves of and actively carries out the persecution of the Church. It is in Chapter 9 that Saul meets the risen Jesus on the Road to Damascus. Now, as Paul, he preaches in the Synagogues, is himself arrested, but manages to escape. Paul approaches the Apostles in Jerusalem, but they are afraid of him at first. Then in Chapter 10, Peter makes the decision to extend the mission to the Gentiles. We meet the first Gentile convert described in the Bible. A Roman Centurion named Cornelius has his entire household baptized. Chapters 10 and 11 show Gentile Churches being formed. In a major step in the formation of the Christian Church, we are told that Gentiles will now receive the Holy Spirit. But a major period of persecution is established by Herod Agrippa.

The rest of the book, Chapters 13 to 28, cover Paul's missionary trips – which take 3 decades, cover about 10,000 miles, take him through a large portion of their known world, and end with him a prisoner in Rome. A powerful theme that runs all through the Book of Acts is that the Holy Spirit is driving everything. The Holy Spirit is the force inside the evangelists. Many have suggested that this book should be call the Acts of the Spirit, not the Acts of the Apostels, because we see the faith

spread in amazingly quick and unexpected ways. Gentiles, who have never even known God in any capacity, are inspired by the words of the Apostles, the 7 helpers, Paul, and Paul's several young assistants. These assistants are ordinary people, as well. Churches are established from Jerusalem to Rome, all because of the Spirit empowering those evangelists. Almost all of them suffer, some live lives of nomads, and many of them, including we believe Paul, and all but one Apostle, are executed for the cause. The Spirit took them over and the Church was born almost overnight.

There is, however, a mistaken view of the Book of Acts which has caused it to get less attention than it deserves. Or perhaps the best way to put it is that Acts has gotten a narrower sort of attention than it deserves. Acts is not just a history book showing us the Holy Spirit in action forming the Church. From a spiritual perspective, it is deeper than this. We see over and over, in quick glimpses, what the Spirit can do for us, too, and for all believers. Early on, we are told in blunt language just what awaits any believer who chooses to accept the baptism of the Spirit. This is from Chapter 2 of Acts. Through Peter, God makes a specific promise, not just to those great, ancient evangelists, but to all believers to come:

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forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹ For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.”

Those who witness the teachings of the Apostles ask what they should do now. They are told to repent, accept forgiveness, and accept the Holy Spirit – and it will be given to them, to their descendants, to all who believe.

We then see how the new believers, who yesterday were pagans, respond:

42 And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. 43 And awe came upon every soul. 44 And all who believed were together and had all things in common. 45 And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. 46 And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, 47 praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

Notice what happens to those who are empowered by the Holy Spirit. They come together as a community. These particular people in Jerusalem are for the most part so poor and desperate that they essentially come together as a single family. What little they have they give to each other willingly, and they accept from each other with joy. They praise God and they watch their numbers grow as other people observe what they now have. The Holy Spirit is acting within them, not just within the evangelists. This is the hidden lesson of the Book of Acts. The first

believers, there in Jerusalem, are the most ordinary of people. The Holy Spirit rises up first inside those who have the least on Earth.

Philip, one of the 7 who has joined in the evangelical effort, is inspired by an angel to go south to Gaza, a desert area. He discovers a man from faraway Ethiopia, a court official, a very important man. He finds the man trying to study the prophet Isaiah and Philip helps him with the book. This is what ends up happening:

36 And as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, "See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?" 38 And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him.

Many have wondered how the Church spread to north Africa so quickly, as this is one area Paul did not go to. Some have suggested that this very important African official brought the faith back with him. It is all because of Philip, a common man.

There is something else going on in the Book of Acts that shows God reaching out to each of us, offering us faith, the Spirit, eternal joy. Near the end of the book, Paul is being shipped to Rome to stand trial. At the very end of the book, he is imprisoned. We don't know what eventually happens to him, just that Luke says that Paul spends at least two years as a prisoner, accepting visitors, and continuing to spread the faith. During that trip to Rome, he is taken aboard a ship across part

of the Mediterranean. He is shipwrecked on the Island of Malta. Here are the edited words of Luke, Paul's companion, and the author of Acts and a Gospel:

2 The native people showed us unusual kindness, for they kindled a fire and welcomed us all, because it had begun to rain and was cold. 3 When Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks and put them on the fire, a viper came out because of the heat and fastened on his hand. 4 When the native people saw the creature hanging from his hand, they said to one another, "No doubt this man is a murderer. Though he has escaped from the sea, Justice has not allowed him to live." 6 They were waiting for him to swell up or suddenly fall down dead. But when they had waited a long time and saw no misfortune come to him, they changed their minds and said that he was a god. 8 It happened that the father of Publius the chief man of the island lay sick with fever and dysentery. And Paul visited him and prayed, and putting his hands on him, healed him. 9 And when this had taken place, the rest of the people on the island who had diseases also came and were cured. 10 They also honored us greatly, and when we were about to sail, they put on board whatever we needed.

Here are people who have been living on an isolated island with limited outside contact. They clearly have some sort of ancient faith. They believe that certain kinds of accidents, like snake bites, are a penalty for being evil. They are good people, and they take in Paul and the rest of the prisoners headed for Rome, as well as the guards and the crew. When a viper bite does Paul no harm, they assume he is a god. Then Paul cures the father of the chief of these people. He cures many others. Finally, when Paul and the rest leave, the people on that island give them all the supplies they need. We are never told what happens to these people. But today, Malta is considered one of the most Christian countries in the world, despite

being right next to a vast Moslem world. I believe that Luke knew that he didn't have to tell us what the Ethiopian official did when he returned home. Likewise, Luke knew he didn't need to tell us what became of the people of Malta. God made sure to bring the faith, the Holy Spirit, to Malta. It took someone who was willing to devote himself to the cause, and in this case, hand his life over to God.

There are three major theological lessons for us in Acts. The first is that we all have the Holy Spirit within us, and therefore, we all have the opportunity to be baptized in the Spirit. This baptism is an outward acceptance of the Holy Spirit. The second lesson is that the Holy Spirit can enable us to do astonishing things. The third is that God is ready to reach anyone on this planet. All God needs is a volunteer who has been baptized in the Spirit. It can be a regular person, one of us. We can bring the message to someone, and, due to the presence of God's grace within them, trigger a response that is waiting deep inside them. There is a part of each of us that very much wants to fully, actively embrace the Holy Spirit, and not just passively allow its presence. The Holy Spirit is the way that God empowers us. And the most important thing we can do once we are empowered is to pass the gift of the faith and the Spirit on to someone else.

Recently, I talked to you about someone whom we called Arthur. He was awaiting the results of a biopsy, and I met him when he was recovering from that

invasive procedure to get the biopsy. I sat with him a while, and we studied the Book of Acts together because he had missed a Bible Study on Acts while he was in the hospital. I told you that I had no idea what came of his biopsy. Since I gave you that message, though, I have heard from Arthur again. It was quite by accident – in a public place, around town. I told him he looked good. I was about to ask him about his biopsy when he told me that it had come back negative. He did not have cancer. He had another condition, something significant, but highly treatable, and something that should not cut his life short. I told him that I was extremely happy for him. It was then that Arthur told me that he and his wife had decided that they were going to do something big.

It was her idea, he told me. She felt the Spirit within her first. They had no children. They had been trying to decide what to do with their wealth once they had died. They are not super rich, but they had both worked in high tech and are well off. They had talked about leaving what they had to a variety of charities after they passed away. Now, they decided they would do something focused. They would pick a single cause and pour not just their assets into it, but also their time. The Spirit had spoken. They would begin to move their assets into a charity that they would begin themselves. They would work full time. I asked him what sort of charity it would be. He said that they didn't know yet. They were praying.

We can all be baptized with the Holy Spirit, if we wish. The Holy Spirit changes us. We don't know where the Holy Spirit will lead us, but the Book of Acts gives us a strong idea of the sorts of changes that we will certainly undergo: enhanced empathy, a lessening of our dependency on our worldly possessions, a desire to help others, an even more powerful desire to pass the Word on to others. We find ourselves capable of doing things that in the past, we wouldn't have thought we could do. This is in part the result of the release we feel when we let go of our need for worldly things. We can all be empowered to live lives of faith that are truly rewarding. And one of the most valuable things that we can do for a person is to help them establish or enrich their faith in God.

Please pray with me.

God, please do not let us stagnate as believers. We wish to be baptized in the Holy Spirit. Let the Spirit fill us, take us over, empower and direct us. Let us be the Spirit-filled faithful, serving you by living the Word for all to see. Amen