

## Acts 18:24-28

### Introduction

The last time we were in Acts, we saw how Luke crafted a narrative connecting Paul's second and third missionary journeys. [For the following, see map on p. 6.] We remember a haircut in Cenchreae (after he left Corinth), a refusal to stay in Ephesus, a sea voyage to Caesarea and greeting the church in Jerusalem, and finally a journey on foot to Antioch in Syria. The sum of these seemingly random observations is to emphasize that the churches in Syria, and Galatia, and Phrygia, and Macedonia, and Achaea are all an extension of the church birthed among the Jews in Jerusalem. That New Covenant Israel is bursting out of the old geographic and ethnic boundaries on its way to filling all the earth. The Jewish church in Jerusalem and the Gentile churches throughout the rest of the Mediterranean (that's vestigial Old Covenant language) are in fellowship together as members of the same body in Christ. There's one church now spread throughout the whole of the earth. This is what we confess when we say in the words of the Apostles' Creed "I believe in *one* holy *catholic* and apostolic church." One, throughout the whole. That's a glorious vision, isn't it? But is it something we only confess with our mouth or is it something we believe so that we think and live and love and pray accordingly?

After spending some time in Antioch, Luke tells us that Paul "left and passed successively through the Galatian region and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples" (18:23). The shorter and far easier route to Paul's destination at Ephesus (cf. 18:20-21) was by sea. But Paul wanted to visit the churches in Galatia again (Derbe, Lystra, Iconium, Pisidian Antioch) to strengthen the disciples, so he travelled the 800 miles to Ephesus, through arduous mountain terrain, on foot. Meanwhile, as Paul was journeying and visiting the churches in Galatia on his way to Ephesus, something happened in Ephesus that Luke wants us to know about.

**I. Acts 18:24-25a** — Now a Jew named Apollos, an Alexandrian by birth, an eloquent man, arrived at Ephesus; and he was mighty in the Scriptures. This man had been instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in spirit, he was speaking and teaching accurately the things concerning Jesus...

Alexandria, the birthplace of Apollos was one of the largest cities in the Roman Empire with a Jewish population of perhaps 100,000 (as much as one-third of the total population). Out of five districts in Alexandria, one district was entirely Jewish, and so also was the majority of a second district. The Jewish population in Alexandria probably traced its beginnings back to the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem, when a large part of the remnant that was left fled to Egypt (cf. 2 Kings 25:26; Jer. 41-44). Alexandria was a leading intellectual and cultural center of the Hellenistic world built around a massive museum and a library at one time boasting up to 400,000 scrolls (Spencer, quoted in Peterson). It had been home to the Jewish Hellenistic philosopher Philo, who probably died just a few years before the beginning of Paul's third missionary journey. It was in Alexandria that Jewish scholars produced the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures that we call the Septuagint.

It's not surprising, then, to hear about a Jewish man from Alexandria who was both eloquent (probably trained in Greek oratory) and mighty in the Scriptures (probably educated in the

Jewish schools under Jewish rabbis). But Luke tells us that this man (Apollos) had also been “instructed [catechized/*katecheo*] in the way of the Lord [Jesus].” There would have been much coming and going between Alexandria and Jerusalem (cf. Acts 6:9), so it’s possible that Apollos had learned about “the way of the Lord (Jesus)” on a visit to Jerusalem, or from some Jews who had come to Alexandria from Jerusalem. Apollos wasn’t just eloquent, and mighty in the (Old Testament) Scriptures, and knowledgeable about the way of the Lord Jesus, he was also fervent in spirit. He had a humble zeal for the Messiah, Jesus, and for true righteousness and holiness. So Luke tells us that when Apollos came to Ephesus he was speaking and teaching accurately the things concerning Jesus. Apollos was a regenerate (born again) man who had repented of his sin and believed in Jesus as the promised Messiah. It seems that in terms of the ministry of the Word, He was eminently qualified: eloquent, mighty in the Scriptures, instructed in the way of the Lord, fervent in spirit. But then Luke says this of Apollos: He was “speaking and teaching accurately the things concerning Jesus”—

**II. Acts 18:25b–26a** — ...knowing [*epistamai*] only the baptism of John; and he began to speak out boldly in the synagogue.

That’s unexpected isn’t it? What does it mean that Apollos knew only the baptism of John? It must mean, to begin with, that Apollos’ baptism had not originally been baptism in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit (Mat. 28:18-20). Apollos had not received the baptism that looks back on the finished work of Jesus on the cross, and His subsequent resurrection and ascension to the right hand of God the Father, and His pouring out of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. Instead, Apollos had received the baptism that at the time was still looking forward to—and was anticipatory of—all these things. Remember that John’s baptism was a preparatory baptism that looked ahead to the one who was coming after him. So we read in Mark’s Gospel:

- Mark 1:4–5, 7–8 (Lk. 3:2-3, 15-17) — John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching **a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins**. And all the region of Judea was going out to him, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, **confessing their sins**... And he was preaching, saying, “After me One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to stoop down and untie the strap of His sandals. **“I baptized you with water; but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”**”

And then in the Apostle John’s Gospel:

- John 1:29–30, 33–34 — [John the Baptist] saw Jesus coming to him and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is He of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who has been ahead of me, for He existed before me.’ And I did not know Him, but He who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘The One upon whom you see the Spirit descending and abiding on Him, this is the One who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ And I myself have seen, and have borne witness that this is the Son of God.”

In receiving John’s baptism, then, Apollos had placed his faith in Jesus as the Messiah who would take away the sins of His people and baptize them with the Holy Spirit. Remember how Luke says that Apollos had been instructed in “the way of the Lord.” That exact wording appears

elsewhere in the New Testament only in connection with the preaching of John the Baptist. Luke writes of John in his gospel:

- Luke 3:3–6 (cf. Mat. 3:1-3; Mk. 1:1-3) — And he came into all the district around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins; as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, “The voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Make ready **the way of the Lord**, make *His paths* straight. Every ravine will be filled, and every mountain and hill will be brought low; the crooked will be straight, and the rough roads smooth. And all flesh will see the salvation of God.’”
- John 1:23 — [John] said, “I am a voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Make straight **the way of the Lord**,’ as Isaiah the prophet said.”

Apollos had been instructed in “the way of the Lord” as it had been proclaimed by John the Baptist, but this means that at the time he received baptism, he could not yet have understood “the way of the Lord” in its fullness.

At this point, we need to ask an important question. If John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, then what are we to say about all the generations of believing Israelites who lived before John’s baptism? Had they never experienced the forgiveness of sins? The answer to that question is both yes and no. Yes, their sins were forgiven in the sense that they were not counted against them (Ps. 32:1-5). But no, their sins were not forgiven in the sense that there was still no sacrifice to finally atone for them. Their sins were still outstanding (cf. Heb. 10:1-4, 11-18). Yes, they were forgiven, but they still awaited the Messiah’s eschatological forgiveness (eschatological refers to the promised Messiah’s consummation of redemptive history). And what about the Holy Spirit? If John’s baptism looked ahead to Jesus’ baptism with the Holy Spirit, are we to understand that the believing Israelites who came before Jesus had never received the Holy Spirit? The answer, once again, is both yes and no. Yes, the Holy Spirit had given them spiritual life and worked true repentance and faith in their hearts (Jn. 3:3-8). In this sense they did have the Spirit. But no, they had not received the Spirit as the Spirit of the risen Jesus who applies to all God’s elect the accomplished eschatological forgiveness of sins and who imparts to them even the Messiah’s own resurrection life. Yes, they had received the Spirit who works repentance and faith in their hearts, but they still awaited the eschatological Spirit. We see, then, that even those who were baptized with John’s baptism still did not receive the eschatological Spirit and the eschatological forgiveness of sins until the day of Pentecost had come. John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, yes, but this was a forgiveness that those who were baptized would not actually receive until their baptism with the Holy Spirit. We see, then, that even those who were already forgiven (whose sins were not counted against them) and who already had spiritual life (in whom the Spirit had worked repentance and faith) were still called to the baptism of John in anticipation of the eschatological forgiveness and resurrection life that was coming. John’s baptism was for all because no one—not even John the Baptist—had ever yet entered into the fullness of the Messiah’s eschatological salvation. There was to be a qualitative difference, then, between salvation as it was experienced prior to Christ, and salvation as it was to be experienced after Christ had been exalted to the right hand of God as the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.

We don't know when Apollos was baptized. Was he baptized some 25 years earlier by John himself when he visited Jerusalem for one of the Jewish feasts? Or was he baptized more recently by some disciples of John who lived in Alexandria and who still didn't know the completed story of Messiah's salvation? Whatever the case may be, it was the anticipatory baptism of John that Apollos received, and not baptism in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit that looked back on the finished work of Jesus. It was this anticipatory baptism of John that Jesus' twelve disciples had also received (cf. Jn. 1:35-37, 40). Later (but before Jesus' crucifixion), the twelve disciples were themselves baptizing with the same forward pointing baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in Jesus as the Messiah who would take away the sin of God's people, baptizing them with the Holy Spirit. For a while, both John and Jesus (or Jesus' disciples) were baptizing at the same time (Jn. 3:26; 4:1-2), but there was no essential difference between their baptisms. The important thing for us to see now is that John's baptism was just as permanently valid as the later baptism in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. These were, in a sense, the same baptism—one forward-looking, one backward-looking. This proclaims to us the central and pivotal and epoch-making significance of the death and exaltation of Jesus. Even as John's baptism was a *baptism of repentance* for the (eschatological) *forgiveness of sins*, pointing people to *Jesus* who would *baptize with the Holy Spirit*, so Peter could say on the day of Pentecost:

➤ Acts 2:38 — “*Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will [now] receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.*”

The substance of both baptisms was the same. What this means is that there was no need for those who had previously received John's baptism to be baptized again after Pentecost. When John said, “I baptized you with water; but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit,” he indicated that his water baptism was not to be replaced by a coming, different/better water baptism, but rather that it would soon be accompanied and matched by that baptism of the Holy Spirit to which it pointed as a sign. In the case of Jesus' twelve disciples who originally received John's baptism, they had since witnessed the full accomplishment of God's salvation in the death and resurrection of Jesus and His pouring out of the Holy Spirit as the one now exalted to the right hand of God. They looked back, now, with clearer vision on that to which their baptism had originally looked forward. We could say, then, that the redemptive-historical accomplishment of God's salvation had itself “automatically updated” their baptism. Or perhaps we could say it like this: Their once anticipatory baptism had now been caught up into the accomplished eschatological fulfillment.

So what does Luke mean when he says that even twenty years after Jesus' resurrection, Apollos still knew (*epistamai*) only the baptism of John? The point here isn't just John's ritual baptism with water, but his whole teaching and doctrine. This was “all” that Apollos knew. We know what the substance of John's teaching and doctrine was. It was the proclamation of the Messiah's imminent arrival, it was a warning of coming judgment, and it was a call to believe in Jesus as the one who would take away the sins of His repentant people, baptizing them with the Holy Spirit. So I think we have to conclude one of two things: Either Apollos still didn't know at all about the accomplishment of these realities or he was still fundamentally deficient in his understanding of their meaning and significance. Apollos didn't need a new water baptism, or even the baptism of the Spirit. He had already repented. He had already received the

eschatological forgiveness of sins through faith in Jesus who was now—whether he knew it or not—resurrected and exalted to God’s right hand. The Spirit who indwelt Apollos was now the Spirit sent from Jesus who was imparting to him—whether Apollos knew it or not—Jesus’ own resurrection life. What Apollos needed was an understanding of how the eschatological realities originally promised in his baptism were now his present possession—and the present possession of all who had believed in Jesus. So we go on to read in the second half of verse 26:

**III. Acts 18:26b** — But when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately [*akribos*].

There were no “inaccuracies” in Apollos’ previous preaching. Luke just said in verse 25 that he had been “instructed in the way of the Lord” and that he was “speaking and teaching accurately [*akribos*] the things concerning Jesus.” “More accurately” means that Priscilla and Aquila explained to Apollos “the way of God” now in the light of its climactic revelation in the death and burial of Jesus on account of our transgressions and the exaltation of Jesus (including His resurrection, ascension, and pouring out of the Holy Spirit) on account of our justification (cf. Rom. 4:25). We can assume that they explained to Apollos the priestly work of Jesus, who once offered up Himself a sacrifice to satisfy divine justice and reconcile us to God, and who now makes continual intercession for us (Baptist Catechism Q. 28). And we can assume, too, that they explained to Apollos the accomplishment of our justification wherein, as an act of God’s free grace, He pardons all our sins, and accepts us as righteous in His sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone (Baptist Catechism Q. 36). In this way, Apollos would also come to a fuller understanding of the Holy Spirit as the one who is now the Spirit of the risen Jesus (Acts 16:7; Rom. 8:9; Phil. 1:19) and who now applies to us this accomplished salvation, uniting us with Christ to share in all the benefits of His death and in His resurrection life. Apollos had already been instructed in “the way of the Lord” in connection with the anticipatory baptism of John. Now, through the explanation of Priscilla and Aquila, he has come to know “the way of God” (and so to understand his own baptism) more accurately—in the light of the full revelation of God’s salvation. Luke concludes, therefore:

**IV. Acts 18:27–28** — And when he [Apollos] wanted to go across [the Aegean Sea] to Achaia [where Paul had originally met Aquila and Priscilla in Corinth], the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him; and when he had arrived, he greatly helped [*polys symbollo*] those who had believed through grace, for he powerfully refuted [*eutonos diakatelenchomai*] the Jews in public, demonstrating by the Scriptures that Jesus is the Christ.

When Apollos first arrived in Ephesus he was already “mighty in the Scriptures.” But now that he understands “the way of God more accurately”—now his “might” in the Scriptures has come fully into its own. Now his eloquence has found the ultimate themes worthy of expounding. Are we expounding these themes to ourselves and others? Now his fervency of spirit has found the truths (the eschatological realities) that will fuel him in devotion and service for the rest of his life. Are these the truths that fuel us in devotion and service? Now Apollos has seen the saving glory of the crucified and risen Messiah, who baptizes with the Holy Spirit, so that all our sins are taken away and we share with Him in all the benefits of His death and in His resurrection life. Paul writes in Ephesians:

- Ephesians 1:7 — In Him we have redemption through His blood, **the forgiveness of our transgressions**, according to the riches of His grace.
- Ephesians 1:13 — In Him, you also, after listening to the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation—having also believed, **you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise**.
- Ephesians 2:4–7 — God, being rich in mercy because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, **made us alive together with Christ**—by grace you have been saved— **and raised us up with Him**, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

And so Paul would say to us this morning:

- Romans 12:1–2 — Therefore I exhort you, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a sacrifice—living, holy, and pleasing to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may approve what the will of God is, that which is good and pleasing and perfect.

