

# Faith of a Servant or Son, Part 2

**Acts 19:1-2, Romans 8:9-17**

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I've encountered anger. I've faced it time and again. It's not always legitimate, but it is very real. Independent churches, Charismatic churches, evangelical churches are populated with many, many people who are former Methodists, former Presbyterians, former Lutherans, and former Catholics, people who are angry with the church of their childhood or the church they attended as adults. They are not angry because of conflict, because of trouble or hardships in those churches. They are not angry because their former churches made some unwise decisions. They are angry because they feel cheated and misled. They feel that our churches normalized their estrangement from God. They could merrily and naively live among us and never hear about, think about, or experience what it means and feels like to be born again. They could be active members, honored members, even leading members and have no clue what it means to be born anew, spiritually reconnected with God, lit up by God's Spirit. They feel like they wasted their lives meeting with us. Are they right? Have we normalized for believers a distant relationship with God? The Bible does not normalize estrangement.

In the third chapter of John's gospel, Jesus said that we must be born again to see or enter the kingdom of God. In the fourth chapter of Galatians, Paul wrote that in the fullness of time, God sent his son that we might receive the full rights of sons. He continued to write that

because, through the blood of Christ, we are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out “Abba, Father.” In other words, through the work of Jesus Christ, we experience a new, intimate relationship with God. A love from God animates us. It moves, motivates and directs the life of a newborn child of God. It is not good enough to talk about being born again. We must actually experience it; and if we experience it, then it will be evident.

Why else, in the nineteenth chapter of Acts, would the Apostle Paul ask twelve believers in Ephesus, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” That sense of peace, assurance, love and familiarity with God was missing. Suppose you met a woman and she never talked about her husband. She never disclosed anything they did, anything he said, anything about him that blessed her. It would be difficult to know whether she was married; and if you somehow knew she was married, you would wonder what experience of love accompanies her marriage? In the same way, it became clear to the Apostle that these believers were not experiencing anything close to what Jesus experienced with God. Paul began trouble shooting. That is why he asked about receiving the Holy Spirit. He was looking for an experience of reconciliation, reestablished communion with God, that the Holy Spirit works in a life. When the believers didn’t know there is a Holy Spirit, Paul continued to troubleshoot. He asked about their baptism. They had not received baptism into the name of the Lord Jesus.

Last Sunday morning before Diane and I attended her home church, we visited with her Dad in his living room. I often discuss Scriptural texts with him although Diane warns me about my tendency to give sermons. I said look at Acts 19. I noted that it appeared the new birth, the receiving of the Holy Spirit, did not occur automatically with baptism. The twelve believers were baptized, then Paul placed hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit. It was later pointed out, from the wording of this text, that the placement of the hands may not have followed

baptism, but been part of it. In the 8<sup>th</sup> chapter of Acts, however, Samaritan believers had to wait after baptism for Peter and John to come and pray with them. Then they received the Spirit. In Acts 10, the first Gentile believers receive the Spirit before they are baptized. Thus, we cannot assume that new birth always accompanies baptism. Anyway, when we went to church last week, my father-in-law's pastor preached on Acts 19. Coincidence? He made the opposite point. He told the congregation that they automatically received the Holy Spirit when they were baptized in Jesus' name. In his view, that is when they were born again. Now this pastor is a friend of mine, and I'm not going to tell you that he is wrong. Instead, I believe an unintended consequence of that position is that many assume they are alright because they are baptized, even though they have never experienced this vital, transforming connection with God. They've never felt the blessing of forgiveness and the joy of their adoption as God's children.

This week, I reread John Wesley's treatise on baptism and his sermons on the new birth and the marks of new birth. When John Wesley founded the Methodist movement, he served in a sacramental church, the Church of England. He was appalled at the spiritual condition of the baptized. Their sins and judgment multiplied faster than those who made no claim of love for God. Wesley compiled 53 sermons to help his young preachers understand and proclaim the Word of God to those who were baptized and those who were not. These 53 sermons form the foundation of The United Methodist Church's doctrine. As John Wesley studied Scripture, he agreed with my pastor friend that infants received the Holy Spirit and the blessing of a spiritual birth with their baptism. However, he also saw how little hearts can be darkened and deceived, how the Spirit is quenched and grieved by sin and unbelief. He saw how the baptized become dead to God's presence and word. He himself became captive to fear and condemnation. I felt the same thing. As a little one I was at peace with God, but as I grew older I felt separated by

my sinful attitudes and actions. John Wesley lived and even preached many years with the faith of a servant, having no peace or sensibility to God's forgiveness of his sins. I, Wesley John, spent years of my youth fearing God's judgment.

We give birth to physical babies in a physically hostile world. None can survive without constant intervention by others. Moreover, the stronger the little ones become, the more they must cooperate. Similarly, we baptize our infants in a hostile spiritual world. Even as their receptive hearts are blessed by our faith, they become injured by our sins and unbelief. Without constant intervention, which includes acts of repentance and faith, they become lost and estranged from God, piling up judgment and condemnation in their acts of unbelief and rebellion. Again, as they grow older, they must cooperate in faith. I want you to hear this story of estrangement and forgiveness. (Feeling Broken video)

All of us who are older understand the vulnerability of infants, children and youth. We also see the blessing of loving, wise relationships. God's will is that you and I personally know his love and forgiveness, and that together we grow into strong, spiritual dynamos who reach the full measure of Jesus' intimacy with the Father and Jesus' impact on the world.

Unbelief and unconfessed sin prevent that intimacy. They resist the Spirit that fills you with love and reconnects you with your Heavenly Father. I borrowed my mother's cane to illustrate something. Sometimes, we whack ourselves with guilt and condemnation when Jesus has already paid the price. In shame and fear, we strike ourselves with guilt, thinking that a self-beating will please God or motivate us to overcome. Self-condemnation is unbelief in the sacrifice of Christ. You do not receive the power to overcome through self-hatred. Sometimes we use to lean or rely upon. When the people Israel trusted in Egypt to protect them from their enemies, Isaiah the prophet told them, "Your leaning on a hollow-reed cane that will snap off

and pierce your hand!” John Wesley told his listeners if you’re relying on your baptism or your righteous acts to commend you, your stick will snap and pierce you. We can, however, trust the word of God, for God doesn’t lie to us. Jesus said, **“Whoever comes to me I will never drive away”** (John 6:37). God intensely wants to connect with you as his child. He desires to fill you with his Spirit. Is that your desire? Then I encourage you as an act of repentance and faith to join in this prayer. I invite you to pray it aloud with me, for we are to help one another experience God’s mercy.

*God and Father of all, I’ve been caught up in the rebellion against you. Although I have acknowledged you as creator and ruler, my acknowledgment has often been empty. I am guilty of ignoring your authority and will, of interpreting your commands and claims to fit my sensibilities and comfort, of squandering your gifts, betraying your trust, despising your word, misrepresenting you and harming your children. I have not only sinned against you and others, but I also have misled others to join in my sins. Your enemies have used my attitudes and actions against you.*

*Despite all of this and the horrific damage it creates, you passionately love me. You’ve sent your one and only Son, Jesus the Christ, to die and atone for my sins. I recognize this to be an undeserved gift, through which you remove my judgment and award me all the rights necessary to be your child and to live as your heir. Please forgive my unbelief and all my guilt. (Forgive me for quenching and grieving your Spirit who generously worked in my baptism.)*

*I accept the gift and rights of being your child. I welcome now into my heart your Spirit that restores me as your child, that cries out to you, “Papa, Father.” (Thank you for giving me a public ceremony of adoption where I was baptized into the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.) You gladly own me as your child, and I gladly own you as my Father. Amen.*