

## **Baptism of the Spirit**

Psalm 29  
Acts 19:1-7

Psalm 29 uses the image of a thunderstorm to illustrate God's power. "The voice of the Lord is upon the waters..." As King David wrote this Psalm, the waters he references must be the Mediterranean Sea. Perhaps he witnessed a storm rolling in off the Sea and crashing over the land. He actually writes, "the God of glory thunders." Hebrew, unlike English, has two separate words for a thunderous noise and actual thunder in the sky. Yet David is enough of a poet to create such a usage in this poem. Indeed, "the voice of the Lord breaks the cedars, the Lord breaks the cedars of Lebanon." The cedars of Lebanon are the biggest, strongest trees David has ever seen. Even they cannot withstand God's power as shown in a thunderstorm.

Further along we read, "The voice of the Lord flashes forth flames of fire." In the Hebrew David writes, that phrase also uses alliteration, the repeated starting of words with the same sound. In English that sound is "efff" (flashing flames of fire); in Hebrew that sound is a guttural "chah". It refers of course to lightning. Have you ever gone camping and a really powerful thunderstorm has blown in over you? In my family we all laugh about the time, nearly twenty years ago now, when that happened to us at Warren Dunes State Park in Michigan. We laugh now. We were not laughing when it happened. The storm really did roll off the waters of Lake Michigan. It lasted *forever*.

It was *intense*. While it lasted we were all terribly frightened. Eventually so much rain fell the water literally floated us around the inside of our tent on our air mattresses.

When you are out close to nature a storm can make you feel vulnerable. David writes as a man who has felt the threat. And he ascribes the awesome power of nature to the Lord. Thunder, lightning, flood, “The Lord sits enthroned” above it all. Hebrew does love its puns and alliterations and double—even triple—meanings. The same word, “ruach”, can mean voice, or breath, or even spirit. In Genesis 1, when “the Spirit of God was moving over the waters,” the word used for spirit is ruach. Its full meaning is the all-powerful Holy Spirit of God, which creates all that exists, blows like the wind, and inspires poets and prophets to proclaim the true messages of the Lord. In Psalm 29 David feels inspired to write about the omnipotent God who comes in thunderstorms and receives the awe-filled worship of his people in the places of worship. (There was not yet a temple in Jerusalem in David's day.)

Around 1300, when European travelers, following in the tracks of Marco Polo, reached India they found Christians already there. Indian Christians, who called themselves Thomists. Their tradition told them the Apostle Thomas—Doubting Thomas—had come to their land and preached the Good News back in the first century. They had none of the written books of the New Testament. But they had collected their own traditions and written them in their various languages. When translated into the Europeans' languages, they were surprised at how many of the stories and teachings were similar, proving yet again that in ages past oral tradition

could be every bit as accurate as a written record.

When the Apostle Paul takes the mountain road from the interior of what we now call Turkey, he emerges above Ephesus, an important Roman garrison, port and retirement community for legionnaires and their families. Ephesus is one of the most important cities in the southeastern parts of the Roman Empire. Acts tells us, “there he found some disciples.” He is probably as surprised to find Christians there as the European traders were in India. Acts 19 is still early days in his missionary career. He will not write Ephesians (to these very Christians plus those who would join them) for years. At any rate, being Paul and a stickler for accurate theology, he asks them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” Candidly they answer, “No, we have never even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.”

Conservative evangelical preacher and author Jerry Falwell Jr. once kicked up a controversy by using this passage from Acts 19 to say that people who claimed to be Christians but had not knowingly received the Holy Spirit were not really Christians. What's more, he contended, unless you could display new spiritual powers, you had not really received the Holy Spirit. These Ephesian believers, he noted, suddenly could speak in tongues and prophesy. We emphasize this controversy in order to clear up an important point from this passage. Here, yes, baptism in the name of the Lord Jesus does confer new spiritual power on believers. But there are a number of places elsewhere in the New Testament where baptism does *not* immediately generate such visible, impressive powers. See, for example, later in this very chapter, where

the onset of faith and baptism lead other believers simply burn the books associated with their former religious beliefs.

The Baptism of the Spirit has from time to time certainly created powerful experiences, new powers. To deny that is to deny the scriptures. But these wild and crazy powers are not the point of baptism. The point of baptism is that it demonstrates a deep, spiritual truth. Baptism—whether of an uncomprehending baby or of a person old enough to have confessed their faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior—symbolizes several facets of the new life we have in Christ. Its waters speak to our having been cleansed from the consequences of our sin through his atoning sacrifice. They also speak of the nourishment the Spirit gives, like water helps plants to grow. The trinitarian formulas we use in our baptism liturgy have great importance as well. As God moved over the waters at the moment of creation, so God will continue to create all that we have and are. As Jesus died for our sins, so he rose from the dead to display his power over sin and death. As the Holy Spirit came to Jesus at his own baptism, so we believe the same Spirit of the Lord works all around us, right now.

*That* is what the baptism of the Spirit means for us. Its test is not whether you can suddenly speak in tongues. No, its test is whether you have a living faith in Jesus. Paul asks, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit **when you (first) believed?**” Ask yourself not what strange new powers you might have received, rather like Peter Parker when he got bit by that radioactive spider, turning him into Spider Man. Ask rather how your relationship with God is going. That is the point of baptism, and of the Christian life.