**The Perfecting of a Bookworm**

(Acts 18:24—19:7)

By Pastor Ricky Kurth

One day a man was in a bookstore, and he saw a book enitled: “How to Solve 50% of Your Problems.” He bought two of them.

Another man was in that same bookstore, and a really big, heavy book fell of the top shelf and hit him on the head. It was a *shelf-inflicted* injury.

Then there’s the man who was reading a book about the life of Henry Ford. It was an auto-biography.

Another guy read a book entitled, “100 Things to Do Before You Die.” He was surprised that yelling for help wasn’t one of them!

Finally, there was a man who *wrote* a book about poltergeists. It sold really well. Copies were flying off the shelves!

The reason we’re talking about *books* is, here in Acts 18 we’re about to meet a bookworm named Apollos. The story begins in Acts 18:24, where we read:

**“And a certain Jew named Apollos, born at Alexandria, an eloquent man, and mighty in the scriptures, came to Ephesus.”** Now to begin with, you’re probably wondering why I say that Apollos was a *bookworm.* Well, you’ll notice that he was from the city of Alexandria in Egypt, and Alexandria was home to the largest library in the world. Some say it had nearly a *million* books, and I’m sure Apollos read some of them. But the reason *I’m* calling him a bookworm is that he was “mighty in the Scriptures,” and you don’t get to *be* mighty in the Scriptures without being a bookworm who spends all his time reading the most important book in the world, *the Word of God.*

Apollos is also described as “an eloquent man.” My dictionary defines *eloquence* as the ability to speak with *emotion,* with an ability to arouse emotions *in others.* That will match something *else* we read about Apollos in the next verse of our text:

**“This man was instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in the spirit, he spake and taught diligently the things of the Lord, knowing only the baptism of John” (Acts 18:25).**

Do you see that word “fervent” there? My dictionary says that word means *hot.* And that’s how the Bible uses it in II Peter 3:10, where Peter predicts that someday

**“...the elements shall melt withfervent *heat...”* (II Peter 3:10).**

So Apollos was what we today would call *a fiery orator.* I picture him like Adolph Hitler. When I see those old newsreels of Hitler giving a speech, I can’t understand a word he’s saying, because I don’t speak German. But boy he really went at it, didn’t he? He was *fervent,* emotional, and able to arouse the emotions of others.

But unlike Hitler, verse 25 says Apollos was “instructed in the way of the Lord.” And that phrase, “the way of the Lord,” is used about a dozen times in the Old Testament. So Luke seems to be telling us that Apollos was not just mighty in his knowledge of the Scriptures, he was *also* instructed in the ways of the Lord that the Old Testament scriptures conveyed.

And then, somewhere along the line, Apollos heard about “the baptism of John.” He perhaps came under the sound of John the Baptist’s voice during one of his thrice yearly trips to Jerusalem to observe Israel’s feasts. But no matter how he became acquainted with the baptism of John, he must have been familiar with what John *preached* in Mark 1:4,15:

**“John did...preach the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins...*saying*, The time is fulfilled, *and the kingdom of God is at hand...*”**

And when Apollos heard *that,* he knew the kingdom that he’d been reading about in the Old Testament Scriptures all his life was finally at hand! That meant it was time to quit *reading* about the kingdom, and go out and *preach it.* It was time to quit being a *bookworm,* and become *a man of action.*

So he came to Ephesus and started *preaching* the baptism of John in the streets of Ephesus, preaching the same message John preached: The time is fulfilled! Time’s up! The kingdom is at hand!”

But if the baptism of John was *all* Apollos knew, as Luke tells us in verse 25, then he *didn’t* know that later on John *met* the *King* of the kingdom, and started pointing people *to Him.* And Apollos also didn’t know that the Jews *rejected* their king when they crucified Him, and they rejected *their kingdom* when they stoned Stephen. Nor did he know that when that happened, God put the kingdom program *on hold,* and so it was *no longer* “at hand.” But he’s about to meet up with some *grace believers* who knew *all of that,* as we see as we read on in our text:

**“And he began to speak boldly in the synagogue: whom when Aquila and Priscilla had heard, they took him unto them, and expounded unto him the way of God more perfectly” (Acts 18:26).**

Now Aquila and Priscilla were that husband and wife team who gave Paul a job making tents back in Corinth (Acts 18:1-3). Paul led them to the Lord, and then went on to teach them all the things that Apollos didn’t know. And when they went to teach *Apollos* all the things he didn’t know, verse 26 says they “took him unto them” to do it. That means they didn’t embarrass him in front of the whole synagogue by approaching him after he addressed the synagogue and say, “Where have you been the past 20 years? Haven’t you heard that the kingdom you’re saying is at hand is on hold?” Instead, they took him unto them *privately* to bring him up to speed.

And bringing him up to speed meant telling him what God *did about it* when the Jews rejected their kingdom. They told him how God made *Paul* an apostle, and sent *him* to preach the remission of sins *without* water baptism! And we know that Apollos must have taken it all in, for later he became one of Paul’s coworkers in the ministry.

Now that shows what a *humble* man Apollos must have been. I mean, he could have easily said, “Who do these tentmakers think they are to teach *me?* Don’t they know I’m mighty in the Scriptures, how instructed I am in the way of the Lord?” Instead, he sat humbly at the feet of this married couple and listened. His reward was that he walked away from that meeting understanding the way of God more perfectly.

Is there anything you can learn from that? You know, if you ever get to thinking you know too much about the Bible to learn from someone you don’t think knows as much as you do, they can stick a fork in you, as the old saying goes, because you’re *done,* spiritually speaking. I try to keep an open mind about everything people try to share with me from God’s Word, and so should you.

But now, remember that Apollos was *a man of action.* Now that he knows the way of the Lord more perfectly, he’s going to go help *other* believers know the way of the Lord more perfectly. So it says in the next verse in our text,

**“And when he was disposed to pass into Achaia, the brethren wrote, exhorting the disciples to receive him: who, when he was come, helped them much which had believed through grace” (Acts 18:27).**

Once Apollos was “disposed” or *inclined* to go help the brethren in Achaia, the brethren in *Ephesus* where he was wrote a letter of recommendation for him that he carried with him to Achaia. Today we’d call a letter like that an ordination certificate. That’s all ordination certificates were in Bible days, a letter from a church saying they recommend a man for the ministry.

So it looks like after Aquila and Priscilla got Apollos all straightened out, he must have hung around in Ephesus long enough for the Ephesian church to get to know him well enough to recommend him in writing.

Now we’re not told *why* Apollos was disposed to pass into Achaia, but if I had to guess, I’d say it was because Aquila and Priscilla told him that the brethren in Achaia *needed* his help. You see, we know that Apollos went to the city of *Corinth* in Achaia, as we learn a few verses later in Acts 19:1. And in our last lesson, we saw the unsaved Jews in Corinth took Paul to court for preaching that Jesus was Israel’s Christ.

And after Paul *left* Corinth, you can bet your bottom dollar that those Jews started persecuting *the church* that Paul established in Corinth. And once Aquila and Priscilla told Apollos about that persecution, Apollos decided to go to Achaia and do what it says at the end of verse 27 and help the ones who had believed through grace.

And the way he helped those grace believers is found in the last verse of Acts 18, where we read:

**“For he mightily convinced the Jews, and that publicly, shewing by the scriptures that Jesus was Christ” (Acts 18:28).**

Now that word “for” there tells us that the way Apollos helped those grace believers was *not* by teaching them more of the grace message. They’d known the grace message longer than he had! No, he helped the grace believers in Corinth by convincing the unsaved Jews in Corinth that Jesus *was* their Christ. That made those Jews *stop* persecuting those grace believers when *they* believed and got saved. I don’t know about you, but I’d find it *very* helpful if the *violent* unsaved men *who beat a man in open court* stopped persecuting me!

Of course, the reason Apollos was able to “mightily” convince those Jews that Jesus was their Christ is that he was mighty in the Scriptures that *identified* Jesus as their Christ. And we know a lot of those Jews must have gotten saved and joined the Corinthian church, for later Paul wrote to that church and said,

**“I have planted, *Apollos watered;* but God gave the increase” (I Corinthians 3:6).**

Paul planted the seeds of the gospel when he was in Corinth when he told them that Jesus was their Christ, and Apollos *watered* that seed when he mightily *convinced* them of it. You know, sometimes even a great apostle like Paul can only plant a seed. He may have told them that Christ died for their sins, but it’s hard to believe that if you don’t believe that the Lord Jesus Christ was God in the flesh. But Apollos watered the seed that Paul planted in many of those Jewish hearts, and God gave the increase.

Speaking of Paul, by now you might be wondering what Paul was up to all this time, and Luke gets back to tracking *his* ministry in Acts *19,* where we read:

“And it came to pass, that, while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul having passed through the upper coasts came to Ephesus: and finding certain disciples,

**“He said unto them, Have ye received the Holy Ghost since ye believed? And they said unto him, We have not so much as heard whether there be any Holy Ghost.**

**“And he said unto them, Unto what then were ye baptized? And they said, Unto John's baptism” (Acts 19:1-3).**

Now when verse 1 says that Paul came to Ephesus, what you’re seeing there is Paul making good on a promise he made in chapter 18. In our last study, we saw that when he *left* Ephesus, he said what General Douglas Macarthur said when he left the Philippines: “I shall return.” Only Paul added, “I shall return *God willing.”* And I guess God *was* willing, because here he is a chapter later back in Ephesus.

And the reason Paul asked these guys if they had received the Holy Ghost since they believed is because of what it says in Acts 2:

**“When the day of Pentecost was fully come...Peter said...*be baptized*...for the remission of sins, *and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost....*” (Acts 2:1,38,41).**

Jews who got baptized *at Pentecost* got saved, and you could *tell* they were saved when they received the Spirit and spoke in tongues (cf.2:4). And these man in Acts 19 probably *weren’t* able to speak in tongues, so naturally Paul asked what they’d been baptized unto. It seemed obvious that they hadn’t been baptized unto Peter, for they didn’t have the gift of the Holy Ghost.

When they answered that they hadn’t heard whether there *be* any Holy Ghost, that means they must have stayed home from church on the day of Pentecost. See what happens when you miss church!

Now we know that these believers were *Jews,* for John only *baptized* Jews (Acts 13:24). And if they were Jews, you would think they would be familiar with the Holy Ghost, for He’s mentioned in the Old Testament Scriptures often. But you know what? *The mystery* is mentioned in the *New* Testament Scriptures often, but how many times have you talked to Christians who never heard of it?

I mean, if you ask most Jews *today* if the Old Testament mentions that God had a Son, most of them would probably say no. But I can think of at least two times the Bible mentions God’s Son in the Old Testament. But the point is, it’s not impossible that these Jews in Acts 19 never heard of the Holy Ghost, even though He’s mentioned in their Bible.

Now you’d think it *was* impossible for them to never have heard of the Holy Ghost *if they were baptized by John the Baptist,* because of what John *said* when he preached the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins:

**“I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance: but He that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: *He shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost...”* (Matthew 3:11).**

If John talked about the Holy Ghost as he baptized people, you’d think these Jews who were baptized by John would have heard of Him.

But the thing is, that’s what John preached *later* in his ministry. When he first started out preaching, he *didn’t* mention the Holy Ghost, as we see in this encapsulation of his ministry in John 1:

**“...this is the record of John, when the Jews sent...to ask him, Who art thou?...he confessed...I am not the Christ ....I baptize with water: but there standeth one among you, whom ye know not; He it is, who coming after me is preferred before me, whose shoe's latchet I am not worthy to unloose. These things were done in Bethabara beyond Jordan, where John was baptizing” (John 1:19,20,26-28).**

Do you see anything there about the Holy Ghost? He didn’t even start out saying *Christ was coming.* If he had, they wouldn’t have asked him if *he* was Christ, right? You know they must have been what they were thinking, or John wouldn’t have “confessed” that he *wasn’t* Christ.

John didn’t mention that Christ was coming until *after* they asked who he was. That means he didn’t mention Christ would come and baptize with the Holy Ghost until after they asked who he was. And that means these Jews here in Acts 19 who never heard of the Holy Ghost must have been baptized by John *before* he mentioned the Holy Ghost. They were some of John’s *earliest* converts.

And *that* means they didn’t even know that Christ came, for John didn’t mention Him until later in his ministry. So Paul knew he had his work cut out for him with these men. He knew they were in need of a *serious* spiritual upgrade, if all they knew was the early ministry of John. So he starts to give them their upgrade in the next two verses of our text:

**“Then said Paul, John verily baptized with the baptism of repentance, saying unto the people, that they should believe on him which should come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus.**

**“When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.”**

Here Paul informed these early disciples of John of what John taught *later* in his ministry and how, when people heard what John said, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. These saints may have been baptized unto John’s baptism, but they hadn’t been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus, for John didn’t baptize people in the Lord’s name until later.

Then, after bringing those saints up to speed with John’s ministry, Paul went on to bring them up to speed with *Peter’s* ministry in verse 6 of our text:

**“And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Ghost came on them; and they spake with tongues, and prophesied” (Acts 19:6).**

Now here we have to ask why paul would help Jewish kingdom saints get a spiritual upgrade in the kingdom program? I mean, he wasn’t their apostle. He was a grace believer, a member of the Body of Christ. So why would he help those kingdom saints get up to speed with the kingdom program?

The answer to that question is: Why *wouldn’t* he? Didn’t we just see a kingdom saint named Apollos help some grace believers at the end of Acts 18? It’s important to understand that just because God had two different programs going at that time, that didn’t mean they didn’t get along and help each other. If God left you behind at the rapture, wouldn’t you help the new crop of Jewish kingdom saints that will rise up in the Tribulation that will follow the rapture?

Now don’t panic, God *won’t* leave you left behind! When it comes to the rapture, God has the same policy the Marine Corp has—“no man left behind!” You’ve got God’s Word on that through Paul! But if He did, I know I’d get busy helping the Jewish kingdom saints promote the kingdom gospel, wouldn’t you?

But now, the way that I taught Acts 19:4,5 a moment ago is *not* the way that they’re usually taught, as you may know. I taught that after Paul explained that John told people to get baptized in verse 5 that people heard what John said and got baptized. But most people read those verses to say that John told people to get baptized, and when these Jews who never heard of the Holy Ghost heard that, *they* got baptized. I know of at least one good grace teacher who understood the passage that way, so you may wish to study this issue out carefully on your own. But it just doesn’t seem to make much sense to me that way.

I suppose you could argue that once they heard that John later baptized people in the name of the Lord Jesus, and they *hadn’t* been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus, so they *wanted* to be baptized in the blessed name of the Lord. But to what end? From the very beginning, John’s baptism was “for the remission of sins” (Mark 1:4). That means when these early converts believed John’s early words and were baptized, they received the remission of sins—they were *saved.* And you only need to get saved *once.* So there was no *reason* for Paul to baptize those saints again.

If Paul *did* rebaptized them, it was the only time in the Bible anyone was ever rebaptized. Not even the apostles who were saved under John’s ministry got rebaptized. Did you know that two of the 12 were baptized by John before they even met the Lord? Speaking of John the Baptist, we read,

**“John stood, *and two of his disciples;* And looking upon Jesus as He walked, he saith, Behold the Lamb of God! *And the two disciples heard him speak,* and they followed Jesus....One of the two which heard John speak, and followed Him, *was Andrew,* Simon Peter's brother. *He first findeth his own brother Simon,* and saith unto him, We have found the Messias...And he brought him to Jesus”(John 1:35-37,40-42).**

Andrew and Peter were baptized by John for the remission of sins and became John’s disciples before they met the Lord, so the Lord didn’t *rebaptize* them. He knew they were already saved by John’s baptism, and didn’t *need* to be baptized again, because they didn’t need to be *saved* again.

And these Jews here in Acts 19 were baptized by John as well, so they didn’t need to be rebaptized either, because they didn’t need to be *saved* again either. They just needed a spiritual update with the Holy Ghost, and Paul was the man for the job. As an apostle, he had the ability to lay hands on believers to help them receive the Holy Ghost.

Now finally, there’s a reason why we’re told in the last verse of our text,

**“And all the men were about twelve” (Acts 19:7).**

The reason we’re told that there were *twelve* men who’d been baptized by John is because the number twelve in the Bible is associated with *Israel.* They had twelve tribes in the Old Testament, they had twelve apostles in the New Testament, and those twelve apostles will sit on twelve thrones in the kingdom of heaven on earth, judging the twelve tribes of Israel (Mt.19:28). So here we’re told that there were twelve men baptized by John to emphasize that his baptism was a *Jewish* ceremony. As Paul wrote in Acts 13:24,

**“John...preached...the baptism of repentance *to all the people of Israel.”***

That’s the truth of God’s Word, despite all the Gentiles who want to be baptized *today.* A lot of them consider John to be the first Baptist, if not *all* of them. And John only baptized Jews.

But now, why would this passage start out talking about *one* guy who was stuck on the baptism of John in Acts 18, and end by talking about *twelve* guys who were spiritually stalled on the baptism of John? What’s the point of this passage? What is it that God is trying to convey with the juxtaposition of these two passages?

I believe what we’re seeing here is a picture of how this dispensation *started,* and how it is going to *end.* That is, this dispensation started with believers who were stuck on water baptism, and it’s going to end with *even more* people stuck on it, represented by these twelve.

This dispensation started with people who had to make a break from the baptism of John when the dispensation of grace began, and I’m sure not all of them were willing to make that break. And I believe this dispensation will end with people going *back* to the baptism of John.

Consider how Paul described the last days of this age in I Timothy 4:1.

**“Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times *some shall depart from the faith*, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils”**

The “faith” that Paul’s talking about there is the faith, or body of truth, that was given to him—that of salvation *without* water baptism. In the latter times of the dispensation of grace, some will *depart* from that faith by going back to John’s baptism.

What did Paul tell Timothy later about the last days?

**“...in the last days...men shall be...*having a form of godliness,* but denying the power thereof...” (II Timothy 3:1,2,5).**

Does water baptism have a form of godliness? Sure!

Now I know I Timothy 4 *goes on* to say that men will depart from the faith by going back to the law’s prohibition of eating unclean meats, but *that too* has a form of godliness. People look godly when they follow something found in the Bible. But there’s no power of godliness in observing something that isn’t written to members of the Body of Christ. And that includes water baptism!

Now you may be thinking, “Water baptism has been around for 2,000 years, so how will Christians go *back* to it in the last days?” The answer would be that they’ll go back to saying what John said about baptism, that it was for the remission of sins! Most Christians who believe that water baptism is still part of God’s program believe that a believer’s first act of obedience after getting saved, or a testimony to salvation—anything *but* for the remission of sins. But all that will change when the last days of the dispensation of grace arrive.

And here’s a sobering thought. When I Timothy 4:1 says that “some” will depart from the faith, that word *some* doesn’t mean *just a few.* My dictionary gives this example to explain a meaning of that word that you’re probably only subconsciously aware of: If you ask me how far away a certain city is, and I reply, “That’s *some miles from here,”* am I saying it’s just a *few* miles from here?

And the Bible uses the word “some” that way as well. Let me ask you, weren’t Joshua and Caleb the only ones who didn’t provoke God in the wilderness? so why does it say in Hebrews 3:16,

**“...*some...*did provoke: howbeit not all that came out of Egypt by Moses.”**

In that verse, the word “some” means *almost everyone.* It means *everybody but two!*

So when Paul says that in the latter times “some” will depart from the faith, it’s very possible that *almost everybody* will depart from the faith, and return to demanding water baptism for the remission of sins as John did, just as we see pictured with these twelve men.

But you know what this passage pictures happening *in between* the beginning of this dispensation and the end of it? Look back at Acts 19:19 again:

**“And it came to pass, that, while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul having passed through the upper coasts came to Ephesus...”**

In between this picture of the beginning of this dispensation its end, Paul had to pass through the *upper coasts* to get to Ephesus, and it was to the Ephesian believers who *lived* in Ephesus that Paul wrote,

**“There is one body, and one Spirit...one Lord, one faith, *one baptism...”* (Ephesians 4:4,5).**

The “one faith” is the faith, the body of truth, that was given to Paul, that of salvation without *water* baptism. That means the “one baptism” that God recognizes in the dispensation of grace is the one every believer receives the moment he believes the gospel of “Christ died for our sins,” the one Paul describes in I Corinthians 12:13:

***“For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body,* whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free.”**

There are a lot of baptisms in the Bible, most of which have nothing to do with water. So when Paul says there’s only *one* baptism, he must mean there is only one that God approves of *today,* in the dispensation of grace. And it’s not John’s baptism!

Did you notice in Acts 19:1 that Paul passed through “the upper coasts” to get to Ephesus? And do you recall that it was to the Ephesians in Ephesus that Paul wrote,

**“...God...hath raised us *up* together, *and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus”* (Ephesians 2:4,6).**

It’s *Paul* who tells us that we’re already seated with Christ *in the uppermost part of heaven,* since that’s where Christ is and we’re in Christ, members of His Body. It’s Paul who tells us that we’re already seated in the *third* heaven, the very throne room of God. Compare those thoughts to the symbolic picture we find in Acts 20:7,9, where

**“Paul preached...and continued his speech until midnight. And...*in the upper chamber,* where they were gathered together...there sat in a window a certain young man...being fallen into a deep sleep: *and as Paul was long preaching,* he sunk down with sleep, and fell down *from the third loft,* and was taken up dead.”**

That’s a picture of how, whenever Paul preached, he brought his hearers into *the uppermost chamber of heaven,* the *third loft* of the third heaven, and told them that *that’s where our citizenship is!* And we do the same whenever we preach Paul.

But now that Paul’s been preached for 2,000 years, men have fallen asleep to Pauline preaching, and soon they’ll fall from the glory of knowing we’re seated with Christ in the uppermost chamber of heaven *into apostasy,* and start baptizing people for the remission of sins again. And we’re seeing that pictured here in the close of Acts 18, and the beginning of Acts 19.

In closing, I want to point out that we can all learn something from Apollos, something very important. Apollos was *woefully behind* in what he knew about God, *but he boldly preached what he knew!* You may not know much about God or the Bible, but you can preach what you know! I myself never preached Christ in a synagogue as Apollos was bold enough to do, but I did preach Him in a Jehovah’s Witness kingdom hall once. And I was just a teen who hadn’t been saved five years at the time.

You actually know more than you think you know. Do you know how many Christians there are that *still* only know the baptism of John? You know enough to tell them that God has made some spiritual upgrades since John baptized, and help people understand the way of God more perfectly. Some of them are mighty in the Scriptures, and instructed in the way of the Lord, but don’t let that intimidate you! Be as bold as Priscilla and Aquila, and know what will happen? The mighty ones who will listen to you as humbly as Apollos will learn the Word more perfectly.

Did you know that there’s a very good chance that Apollos went on to write the book of Hebrews? I personally think he did. Hebrews is filled with *Hebrew things,* things found in the Hebrew Old Testament Scriptures. Who better to write it than a man like Apollos who was mighty in those very same Scriptures?

The point? If you’ll share the grace message with someone might in the Scriptures, who knows what they’ll go on to accomplish for the Lord! If that sounds like something you’d like to see happen in your Christian life, why not pray about it right now, and determine in your heart that you’ll be as bold as Apollos when you get the opportunity to share the grace message with someone who is instructed in the way of the Lord.

You’ll be eternally glad you did.