

Acts

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. (Acts 1:8 ESV)

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts 2:42 ESV)

Ministry That Turns A City Upside Down

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Acts 19:8-20

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Introduction:

Good morning, Redeemer! I want to invite you to turn with me in your Bibles to Acts 19.

In this passage we find the Apostle Paul continuing his work in the city of Ephesus. Paul ministered here for between 2-3 years, and Luke condenses that entire ministry into three short episodes. Think about that. Paul did a LOT of ministry in Ephesus, but Luke chose to highlight THIS. Obviously, there is something in this story that Luke – inspired by the Holy Spirit – recognized as particularly significant.

One thing we need to notice in particular is that this story is *setting the stage* for the episode that we will be considering next Sunday. Next Sunday we will find the city of Ephesus in a full-fledged riot! As the gospel goes forth, the city of Ephesus is flipped on its head! This morning, then, we are catching a glimpse into the kind of ministry that has *that* kind of effect – the kind of ministry that turns a city upside down. To that end, look with me now to Acts 19. We're going to be reading from verse 8 to verse 20. Hear now God's holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today.

⁸ And he entered the synagogue and for three months spoke boldly, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God. ⁹ But when some became stubborn and continued in unbelief, speaking evil of the Way before the congregation, he withdrew from them and took the disciples with him, reasoning daily in the hall of Tyrannus. ¹⁰ This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.

¹¹ And God was doing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, ¹² so that even handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched his skin were carried away to the sick, and their diseases left them and the evil spirits came out of them.¹³ Then some of the itinerant Jewish exorcists undertook to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, “I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul proclaims.” ¹⁴ Seven sons of a Jewish high priest named Sceva were doing this. ¹⁵ But the evil spirit answered them, “Jesus I know, and Paul I recognize, but who are you?” ¹⁶ And the man in whom was the evil spirit leaped on them, mastered all of them and overpowered them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded. ¹⁷ And this became known to all the residents of Ephesus, both Jews and Greeks. And fear fell upon them all, and the name of the Lord Jesus was extolled. ¹⁸ Also many of those who were now believers came, confessing and divulging their practices. ¹⁹ And a number of those who had practiced magic arts brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all. And they counted the value of them and found it came to fifty thousand pieces of silver. ²⁰ So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily. (Acts 19:8-20 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

It is not lost on me that this text raises a number of questions. Questions like, “Why was God healing people with Paul’s old handkerchiefs and aprons? Should *we* be healing people with handkerchiefs? And do people get possessed by demons today?” I would suggest to you that this spiritual episode is just a *part* of what we are meant to take away from this story, but since I’m convinced that it is going to monopolize our attention until we address it, let’s go ahead and clear the ground.

Clearing The Ground: What Should We Make Of This Miraculous Story?

First and foremost:

1. Signs and wonders served to validate the ministry of the Apostles

It’s tempting to read through the book of Acts and then to look at our local churches and to wonder, “Why isn’t God healing anyone with *my* handkerchief?” But, in order to answer that question, we need to recognize that there was something *unique* – something *distinctly different* – that God was doing in and through the Apostles. Their ministry was miraculous! Earlier, in Acts chapter 5, Peter’s *shadow* was healing people!

So, why was that? Why is it that the ministry of the Apostles was marked by so many signs and wonders? Was it simply that they had more faith than the rest of us? Some have argued that, but the Apostle Paul provides a different explanation. Pointing to these miracles, he wrote to the church in Corinth and explained:

The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, **with signs and wonders and mighty works** (2 Corinthians 12:12 ESV)

So, if we want to understand the significance of these miracles, Paul himself explained that their primary function was to validate his status as a true Apostle. This was an *important* validation because God had a particularly *important* assignment for the Apostles. When Paul later wrote to this church in Ephesus, he reminded them that they were the household of God:

built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone (Ephesians 2:20 ESV)

The Apostles were FOUNDATIONAL! These were the men who passed on Jesus' authoritative teaching! These were the men who wrote the New Testament! So, God in His wisdom, recognizing that we might be tempted to dismiss men who claimed to speak on Jesus' behalf, GRABBED HOLD of our attention and marked these men with a unique and unmistakable mark! These signs and wonders were used by God – almost like His seal of approval – to validate the ministry of the Apostles.

Now, don't *overhear* that. I'm not suggesting that miracles no longer happen. They do. I'm not suggesting that people no longer receive healing. They do!

But I AM saying that it would be wrong to use this passage to justify dropping your used handkerchief into the mailboxes of your sick neighbor. You're not an Apostle.

Signs and wonders served to validate the ministry of the Apostles. That's the primary thing that we need to see in this miraculous story. But this miraculous story also serves to remind us that:

2. There is a spiritual battle being waged all around us

Ephesus was not just a *sinful* city. It was not just a *lost* city. It was a *spiritually dark* city.

False gods were worshipped. Magic was practiced. Demons took possession of people.

In verses 13-16, some Jewish men noticed that powerful acts were being performed in the name of Jesus, and so they decided that they would venture out to see what they could accomplish with this new spiritual weapon. They attempted to cast a demon out of a man and the demon replied:

“Jesus I know, and Paul I recognize, but who are you?”¹⁶ And the man in whom was the evil spirit leaped on them, mastered all of them and overpowered them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded. (Acts 19:15b-16 ESV)

This is a terrifying story. These were SEVEN grown men! The demon-possessed man overpowered all of them, and stripped them naked, and they ran out of that house wounded and thankful to be alive. They were trying to play with spiritual things, and they learned a painful lesson. Spiritual warfare is not a game.

Paul learned this lesson well in Ephesus. When he wrote his letter to the Ephesians, he reminded them:

For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. (Ephesians 6:12 ESV)

It is in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians that we find Paul’s detailed instructions about how we need to arm ourselves for the spiritual warfare that we are engaged in. G. Campbell Morgan observes:

It was in Ephesus that this man became supremely conscious of that world of spiritual antagonism which his writing so clearly revealed, and which we need to recognize even today.¹

Let me be really clear: If you think that evangelism is the task of convincing skeptical people to accept the claims of Christianity, then you will find yourself fighting with both hands tied behind your back! In our evangelism, we are seeking to bring dead people to life! In our evangelism, we are seeking to release people who are enslaved to sin and death!

¹ G. Campbell Morgan, *The Acts Of The Apostles* (New York, NY: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1924), 449.

Evangelism is *spiritual* work! It is *supernatural* work! It is *demonically opposed* work! It therefore needs to be *prayerful* work, or it will be *fruitless* work. This is not a game. It's a fight for our spiritual lives! Peter warns:

Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. (1 Peter 5:8 ESV)

This miraculous episode in Ephesus reminds us that there is a spiritual battle being waged all around us. Thankfully, it also reminds us that:

3. Greater is he that is in you than he that is in the world

I'm drawing this heading from 1 John 4:4 where the beloved disciple reminds us:

Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. (1 John 4:4 ESV)

The story of the demoniac didn't end well for the seven sons of Sceva, but it should still be an encouragement to us. When they attempted to cast the demon out, the demon replied:

"Jesus I know, and Paul I recognize, but who are you?" (Acts 19:15b ESV)

These men should have been afraid, because they were dealing with a power that far surpassed their own and they were attempted to wield Jesus like a good luck charm. I found the language of one commentator helpful when he explained:

The name of Jesus, like an unfamiliar weapon misused, exploded in their hands; and they were taught a lesson about the danger of misusing the name of Jesus in their dabbling in the supernatural.²

These men *should have been afraid*.

But we don't need to be afraid. Because we don't wield Jesus like a good luck charm, do we? No, as we saw last Sunday, we are UNITED with Jesus. We are IN Christ, and he is powerfully living

² Richard N. Longenecker, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary (John - Acts)*, ed. Frank A. Gaebelin, vol. 9, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), 498.

and working IN us. Unlike the sons of Sceva, when we venture into dark places, the power and authority of Jesus goes with us. In Luke’s gospel, we read:

The seventy-two returned with joy, saying, “Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!”¹⁸ And he said to them, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven.¹⁹ Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you.²⁰ Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.” (Luke 10:17-20 ESV)

I included verse 20, because I don’t want to guard against one of the dangers that arises whenever we talk about spiritual warfare. The most common tendency here in North America is to *ignore* this spiritual warfare, but there are others who fall into the opposite ditch and *obsess* over it. Don’t fall into that trap.

Go into the darkness with an awareness of the spiritual battle that we are in. Go into the darkness with boldness because “greater is he that is in you than he that is in the world.” But don’t root your joy in the fact that spirits are subject to you. Rejoice in the miracle that your name is written in heaven.

That was a lot of attention for one detail in this story, but some details have a greater ability to distract and I really wanted to clear the ground so that we can see ALL of what this passage has for us. That being said, with the time that we have remaining, I want to scale back from this one detail and look instead at Paul’s ministry in Ephesus as a whole. The signs and wonders were just part of it. Next Sunday, we will read about a riot that broke out in Ephesus because the city had been transformed by the gospel. How did that happen? What kind of ministry turns a city upside down?

What Kind Of Ministry Turns A City Upside Down?

First, in light of all that we’ve considered thus far, I think we can say that the kind of ministry that turns a city upside down is:

1. Ministry that is animated by the power of God

We've already covered this at length, so I will be very brief. The message of our ministry is not, "Come to Jesus and become a better father." Nor is it, "Come to Jesus and become kinder" or "become more disciplined" or "become more respectable". Those are admirable goals, but Jesus didn't come to help grumpy men become kind. He came to bring dead people back to life!

Ministry that turns a city upside down is ministry that aims higher than self-help and entertainment and shoots instead for the supernatural, only-God-can-do-it, NEWNESS OF LIFE! And if we want to see His power changing lives in this place, then we need to start asking for it! We need to put less confidence in our strategies and more confidence in our prayer. I was convicted by a quote I read recently which said:

we might begin to suspect something is wrong when we soberly realize that the vast majority of the programs and ministries in many of our Christian organizations and churches would continue on unabated even if the Holy Spirit did not show up.³

Church, if we want to see this city transformed for Jesus, then let's aim higher and let's expect more! Amen? There is a powerful Saviour working in and through us! Let's resolve today to stop trying to win spiritual battles in our own strength. Our own strength is not enough. Ministry that turns a city upside down is ministry that is animated by the power of God.

Second, ministry that turns a city upside down is:

2. Ministry that is saturated with the Word of God

Before we see any of these miraculous episodes in Ephesus, we find Paul doing what Paul always does. Our attention immediately fixates on the signs and wonders, but this story begins with Paul faithfully preaching and teaching the Word. He goes into the synagogue first and preaches for three months. Then, after he's kicked out of the synagogue, we read in verses 9-10:

But when some became stubborn and continued in unbelief, speaking evil of the Way before the congregation, he withdrew from them and took the disciples with him, reasoning daily in the hall of Tyrannus. ¹⁰ This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks. (Acts 19:9-10 ESV)

³ Timothy C. Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2010), 410.

Paul's ministry was marked by an unwavering conviction that there is POWER in the proclaimed word of God. Charles Spurgeon once said:

we need to defend the Bible about as much as we need to defend a lion. A much better strategy is to let it loose.⁴

Let it loose! All Scripture is breathed out by God. The Holy Spirit uses the Word like a sword to cut through the hardest of hearts and to perform the surgery that brings dead people to life.

If you are here this morning and you are a Christian, then you have experienced that. Haven't you? You remember hearing that sermon where it felt as if the preacher was preaching right to you. You remember when those ancient words jumped off the page and immediately sounded more relevant and applicable than anything you had ever heard. You remember feeling exposed. Convicted. Understood. Loved. Restored. And it all happened while the message of this Book was proclaimed to you.

And yet, somewhere along the way, Christians slip into either amnesia or stupidity! We start to say things like, "Well, people don't want to hear the *Bible*. They don't have the attention span for *sermons*. We need to find a new approach for this new generation." Says who!?! You didn't think you wanted the Bible either! But the Word of God was what you needed, wasn't it?

It is still what the world needs. God forgive us for all the men and women who came to the church looking to hear from God's Word who instead heard a pep talk on parenting or a round table discussion about media or whatever cheap gimmick the church was peddling at the time.

People today are drowning in hot takes, and opinions, and Ted Talks, and "This Just In", and "new studies suggest"... When they come to us – whether here in our corporate worship, or separately in our personal lives – let's resolve that our ministry will be *saturated* with the Word of God. Amen?

Third, ministry that turns a city upside down is:

⁴ Charles Spurgeon as quoted in Millar, Gary; Campbell, Phil. *Saving Eutychus: How to preach God's word and keep people awake*. Matthias Media. Kindle Edition.

3. Ministry that invokes a fear of God

As Paul preached faithfully and as God performed signs and wonders the city took notice. After the episode with the demoniac, we read in verse 17:

And this became known to all the residents of Ephesus, both Jews and Greeks. And **fear fell upon them all**, and the name of the Lord Jesus was extolled. (Acts 19:17 ESV)

This city that was known for its great temple to Artemis and for its dabbling in magic found itself standing in the presence of a power that it had never seen before. These people were not unfamiliar with spiritual things – their lives were *steeped* in spiritual things! But here was a God that they did not know. And, after the episode with the sons of Sceva, they realized that He was not like the false gods of their city.

Here is a God who heals the sick and frees the possessed. Here is a God before Whom the demons flee! Here is a God who will not be wielded like a good luck charm.

As the Ephesians encountered the living God a great fear fell upon the city.

We saw a similar episode all the way back in Acts 5. When Ananias and Sapphira attempted to lie to God, He struck them down where they stood. We read:

And **great fear** came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things. (Acts 5:11 ESV)

You might be tempted to read these stories and to think, “Oh no! What a setback that must have been! We don’t want the city to be *afraid* of God!” But, interestingly, in both of these stories, the fear of the Lord led to a great revival!

And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women (Acts 5:14 ESV)

So the word of the Lord **continued to increase and prevail mightily**. (Acts 19:20 ESV)

In both of these instances the cities were TRANSFORMED when they witnessed – for lack of a better term – the GODNESS of God!

Brothers and sisters, when we try to “soft-sell” God – when we try to edit Him, and contemporize Him, and make Him more palatable for our culture – we THINK that we are furthering our evangelism. But the opposite is true! The world needs is to catch a glimpse of God Who is a CONSUMING FIRE! It is only when we see Him for who He is that we are enabled to finally see the horror of our sin and our desperate need of a Saviour.

Until we experience a holy fear of God, we don’t think we need grace. Which is likely why Proverbs 1:7 says:

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge (Proverbs 1:7a ESV)

Ephesus was STEEPED in idolatry and sin. What that city needed was a wakeup call! We need the same thing here in Orillia. Ministry that turns a city upside down is ministry that invokes a fear of God. And that lead to our fourth and final lesson. Ministry that turns a city upside down is:

4. Ministry that is marked by real repentance

Look with me at verses 18-19:

Also many of those who were now believers came, confessing and divulging their practices. ¹⁹ And a number of those who had practiced magic arts brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all. And they counted the value of them and found it came to fifty thousand pieces of silver. (Acts 19:18-19 ESV)

At first glance, we might be tempted to think that lost people in Ephesus were coming to the Lord and immediately throwing away everything from their old life. That’s how I read this passage the first time through. But look closely at verse 18 again:

Also **many of those who were now believers came**, confessing and divulging their practices. (Acts 19:18 ESV)

The people who came out of the woodworks to burn their books of magic were *already believers*. Paul ministered in Ephesus for two and a half years! Sometime near the end of his ministry, a *wave of repentance* washed over the city of Ephesus and BELIEVERS went into their homes and grabbed their books of magic and brought them out into the street for a massive bonfire!

As it turns out, these new Christians had surrendered their lives to Jesus, but they had some MASSIVE BLIND SPOTS. They worshipped with the congregation in the gatherings but then they went home to their magic arts and their books of incantations. What's interesting here is that this text doesn't say that these people *pretended to be believers*. No, it classifies these men and women as real, bonafide believers! Who had books of magic at home.

We need to add that category to our understanding of what it means to follow Jesus. Real Christians can have real blind spots. There are real Christians in the world who are still dabbling with real sin.

But when the fear of the Lord fell on the city of Ephesus, those believers were enabled to see how DANGEROUS it was to continue to play with sin and they made a dramatic, costly break with their sin. A great wave of real repentance washed over the church! People began to bring their books of magic out into the streets, and they burned them where all their neighbours could see. The books they burned were worth nearly 50,000 pieces of silver. One commentator speculates:

The value of the 'rubbish' was high - corresponding to the wages of 50,000 workmen for a day's work apiece⁵

50,000 days wages! 137 years wages!

This was costly repentance! This was "burn the boats – I'm not going back" repentance! This was public, and dramatic, and definitive! And the neighbours noticed. EVERYONE noticed!

Half-hearted, luke-warm, hypocritical churches don't change the world. When we try to live a double life – when we live one way on Sunday but then indulge in sin from Monday to Saturday – we neuter our witness. How are we going to tell the world that there is power in the name of Jesus when they look at our lives and see no evidence of change?

But when a wave of repentance washes over a city like it did in Ephesus – when the fear of the Lord falls on the church and when believers powerfully and definitively turn away from sin – THAT changes everything!

⁵ I. Howard Marshall, *Acts* (Leicester, England: inter-Varsity Press, 1980), 312.

I pray that we would see an Ephesus-like move of the Spirit here in Orillia. I truly do. More power. More hunger for His Word. More fear of the Lord. More repentance. I pray that He would flip this city upside down such that it could be said of Orillia as it was said of Ephesus:

So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily. (Acts 19:20 ESV)

Would you join me in asking God for that? Let's pray together.