



G R A C E

REFORMED BAPTIST CHURCH

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## THE BOOK OF ACTS

### Sermon Notes

### Paul's Third Missionary Journey, Part 2

#### *The Sons of Sceva*

Acts 19:11-20

February 10, 2008

- I. God Performs Miracles Through Paul
- II. Jewish Exorcists Attempt to Recreate Paul's Miracles
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  - a. The People Confess
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#### I. God Performs Miracles Through Paul

- Luke writes, in **Verses 11-12**, “God was performing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, so that handkerchiefs or aprons were even carried from his body to the sick, and the diseases left them and the evil spirits went out.”
  - As a physician, Luke would have been particularly interested in healings that defied the laws of medicine in his day.
  - The scene here, in **Verses 11-12**, brings to mind the episode in Luke 8:43-44 where “a woman who had had a hemorrhage for twelve years, and could not be healed by anyone, came up behind Him [Jesus] and touched the fringe of His cloak, and immediately her hemorrhage was stopped.”
  - The handkerchiefs and aprons that Luke refers to here are likely sweat rags that the Apostle Paul tied around his head and waist, respectively, as he worked as a tentmaker in Ephesus.

- It is certainly no mere coincidence that such a parallel exists. The reason for this is that it is the same power which accomplished both the acts of Jesus as well as the acts of the Apostle Paul – the very power of God Himself.
- As such, God was, once again, authenticating the apostolic authority of Paul through these miracles. God was demonstrating that Paul was, in fact, who he claimed to be – an Apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself – appointed directly by the risen Savior to proclaim the Gospel in the apostolic era.

“For I will not presume to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me, resulting in the obedience of the Gentiles by word and deed, in the power of signs and wonders, in the power of the Spirit; so that from Jerusalem and round about as far as Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ.”  
Romans 15:18-19

“The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles.”  
2 Corinthians 12:12

- ❑ Once again, the reason for this “apostolic authentication” was, in great part, because the *canon* of Scriptures – the 66 books of the Bible – had yet to be completed, and God was demonstrating that these apostles had unique authority given to them by the risen Christ. It would be these apostles that God would use to complete the Scriptures [specifically, of course, the New Testament].
- ❑ Luke makes it clear that this particular group of miracles, through the hands of Paul, were “**extraordinary.**”
  - In fact, the Greek words translated “extraordinary” [Verse 11], are *ου τας τυχουσας ou tas tychousas*; literally meaning “no ordinary [powerful deeds].”
    - The reason for the unusual, out-of-the-ordinary, nature of these miracles was because of the “unusual character of these people” in Ephesus, and their closely-held beliefs concerning the occult, superstition and magic [vv. 18-19].
    - God was demonstrating, through Paul, the superiority of His power compared to their magic.
    - Thus, the multiple attempts to recreate this phenomenon today [healing handkerchiefs] are not only deceptive, but they are without biblical warrant or merit.
    - Notice that God was healing both the diseased/sick [“the diseases left them”] and the demon-possessed [“the evil spirits went out”].

- As always, these miracles are pictures of **the greatest miracle of all – OUR SALVATION.**
- For example, the word used by Luke to describe the leaving of the disease [*apallasso*] is used in Luke 12:58 and Hebrews 2:15, where it means “reconcile” and “free” respectively. Certainly our own salvation involves complete reconciliation and freedom.

**II. Jewish Exorcists Attempt to Recreate Paul’s Miracles**

- ❑ Luke continues, in **Verse 13**, “But also some of the Jewish exorcists, who went from place to place, attempted to name over those who had the evil spirits the name of the Lord Jesus, saying ‘I adjure you by Jesus whom Paul preaches.’”
- ❑ Exorcists were not uncommon in the Greco-Roman world, even among the Jewish people [Matthew 12:27; Acts 13:6].
- ❑ Furthermore, as John Polhill notes: “Ancient magicians were syncretists and would borrow terms from any religion that sounded sufficiently strange to be deemed effective. These Jewish exorcists of Ephesus were only plying their trade. Paul’s ‘spell’ in Jesus’ name seemed effective for him, so they gave it a try.”
- ❑ In other words, they were the proverbial “seed-pickers” seeking to choose that which was profitable [ultimately, in terms of money!] for whatever religion “worked” and use it in their “trade.”
- ❑ Thus, the ancient magicians had no real interest in Jesus Christ other than what He could do for them.

**So it is today with many professing Christians. They seek the “potential” benefits of the Christian faith without whole-hearted surrender and commitment to Christ.**

- ❑ Furthermore, often times contemporary Christians, in our attempt to persuade non-believers to embrace Christ, encourage them to “try” Christ, as they would “test” anything else out. This sort of “test driving” the faith, we often believe, will convince them to choose Christ over the countless other alternatives.

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- ❑ These ancient exorcists and magicians were also master manipulators.
- ❑ At its core, the use of magic is an attempt to manipulate through some mechanistic process or formula. It seeks to manipulate not only the perceived source of power, but also the observer [or client, perhaps].

“Magic seeks to manipulate the gods, expecting formulaic results, whereas miracle is God’s sovereign act through someone.”  
Darrell Bock

- ❑ **Further, the use of magic is intended, ultimately, to result in the exaltation of the magician.**
- ❑ However, God-wrought miracles involves the power of God working through His apostles, ultimately for His [God’s] own glory [which He shares with no one].
- ❑ Unfortunately, many of us today seek to manipulate God in getting what we want. We do so through various means, many of which may even appear noble.
  - For example, we may try and “make a deal” with God, praying, “God, if you will simply grant me “x”, then I will do “y”.
  - Or it may be even more subtle than this. For example, we may act in a certain way, ultimately, because we expect something from God.
    - One of the most common examples of this is financial giving. We must ask ourselves the question: “Do we give to the church or some Christian organization simply out of love and obedience to the LORD?” Or, do we do so because we believe that if we give, then we will receive something in return?
    - These types of questions reveal **our hearts...our motives**. We must seek to live lives of humble and loving obedience unto the LORD. We must continually examine our hearts and motives to determine if we are, in any way, through our actions, attempting to “force the hand of God” [as if anyone could do this!] or “manipulate” Him – as we would a parent – to get what we want.
- ❑ To the average listener, these Jewish exorcists would have appeared to be “Christians.” They would have even evoked the name of Jesus; however, it would have been done so in a deceptive fashion. This is the essence of taking the LORD our God’s name in vain!
  - “Several magical papyri which have survived from those days to ours contain attempts to reproduce the true pronunciation of the ineffable name [Yahweh] – *Iao, Iabe, Iaoue*, and so forth – as well as other Jewish expressions and names such as Sabaoth and Abraham, used as elements in magic spells.” F.F. Bruce
  - In fact, one such “magical papyri” belongs to the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris, and reads: “I adjure you by Jesus, the God of the Hebrews” [magical papyri 4, in *PGM* 4.3019-20, written in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century AD]
  - Another such ancient incantation reads, “Hail, God of Abraham, hail, God of Issaac, hail, God of Jacob, Jesus Chrestus, Holy Spirit, Son of the Father.”

- The statue of the Goddess Artemis was widely known for the “mysterious terms” [actually, it was simply gibberish] “engraved on the crown, girdle, and feet” of the idolatrous image.
- This gibberish was known as “Ephesian letters” or “Ephesian scripts.” These “Ephesian letters” were written on “charms, amulets and talismans.” Thus, they essentially became “luck charms” that the Ephesians believed possessed magical powers.
- Yet, these types of occult practices, as foreign as they may sound to the modern reader, are no different than horoscopes and mediums that are so popular today [even among professing Christians!].
- Moreover, many in the “Christian community” claim to be modern-day healers, possessing the apostolic gift exercised here by the Apostle Paul. These men and women evoke the name of Jesus, use Christian language, and quote from the Scriptures. However, their desired ends are not the glory of God, but the glory of themselves.

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- Luke, then, writes, in **Verse 14**, “Seven sons of one Sceva, a Jewish high priest, were doing this.”
  - This story is certainly similar to Simon Magus – Simon the “magician” [Acts 8] who sought to “capture” the power of the apostles and use it for his own gain.
  - Interestingly, **no historical records exist that confirm this claim by Luke.** [The Jewish historian Josephus listed all of the high priests leading up to the fall of the Temple in A.D. 70, and Sceva was nowhere to be found].
  - In other words, **no high priest ever existed named Sceva.**
  - Therefore, Sceva and his seven sons may have been related to a high priestly family. However, what is most probable is that the phrase “a Jewish high priest” was used by Sceva and his seven sons in an attempt to impress the people of Ephesus and gain a great reputation and following.
  - It is quite possible that – charlatans as they were – the claim to the Jewish high priestly class was a complete lie.
  - Thus, it is very likely that if Luke were writing today, he would have placed the words: *a Jewish chief priest* would have been in quotes: a Jewish “chief priest.”
  - This would have been, then, a classic case of ancient “false advertising.”
- Luke’s inclusion of the number of sons of Sceva is likely intended to demonstrate that **seven charlatans are up against one true apostle.** Therefore, this is a “showdown”

similar to others throughout the Scripture [such as Elijah and the prophets of Baal in 1 Kings 18.

- ❑ Yet, it is not even that the seven sons of Sceva are up against Paul; but, rather, that they are up against God!

### III. An Evil Spirit Overpowers the Impostors

- ❑ Luke continues, in **Verses 14-15**, “Seven sons of one Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, were doing this [saying, ‘I adjure you by Jesus whom Paul preaches...’]. And the evil spirit answered and said to them, ‘I recognize Jesus, and I know about Paul, but who are you?’ And the man, in whom was the evil spirit, leaped on them and subdued all of them and overpowered them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded.”
  - The evil spirit literally says to the sons of Sceva, “Jesus I *know* [*ginosko*], and Paul I *respect* [*epistamai*], but who are you?”
  - It should be of no surprise that **the demon actually confesses Christ**. James 2:19 states, “Even the demons believe and shudder.”
- ❑ This scene brings to mind the situation in the Book of Exodus with the court magicians of Pharaoh in Egypt just prior to the Exodus [in Exodus 7-9].

“Pharaoh then summoned wise men and sorcerers, and **the Egyptian magicians also did the same things by their secret arts...**” Exodus 7:11

“But **the Egyptian magicians did the same things by their secret arts**, and Pharaoh's heart became hard; he would not listen to Moses and Aaron, just as the LORD had said.” Exodus 7:22

“But **the magicians did the same things by their secret arts**; they also made frogs come up on the land of Egypt.” Exodus 8:7

“**But when the magicians tried to produce gnats by their secret arts, they could not**. And the gnats were on men and animals. The magicians said to Pharaoh, “This is the finger of God.” But Pharaoh's heart was hard and he would not listen, just as the LORD had said.” Exodus 8:18-19

“**The magicians could not stand before Moses because of the boils that were on them and on all the Egyptians.**” Exodus 9:11

- ❑ Thus, the court magicians could deceive the people of Egypt only to a point. Ultimately, when God chose to demonstrate the power that is His alone – to CREATE – the magicians were humiliatingly exposed!
- ❑ In fact, they were overcome by the very “force” they claimed to be able to control.
- ❑ So it was with the sons of Sceva – that they were overcome by the spirit they claimed to control.

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- ❑ This scene, in **Verse 16**, where the evil spirit overpowered the sons of Sceva, is almost comical. In fact, the Jewish people were known for their extreme modesty; therefore, the nakedness of the Jewish impostors reflects complete and total humiliation here.
- ❑ The truth is clear: **Man can never replicate *true* miracles of God!** To claim to or attempt to do so is paramount to elevating one's self to the status of God.

#### **IV. The Name of Jesus Christ is Magnified**

- ❑ After the evil spirit overpowered the sons of Sceva, Luke writes, in **Verse 17**, “This became known to all, both Jews and Greeks, who lived in Ephesus; and fear fell upon them all and the name of the Lord Jesus was being magnified.”
  - Thus, the manipulative and deceptive plans of the sons of Sceva backfired.
  - This is a powerful demonstration of God's sovereign use of even the sinful acts of man to bring Himself glory.

##### **a. The People Confess**

- ❑ Then, in **Verse 18**, Luke continues: “Many also of those who had believed kept coming, confessing and disclosing their practices.”
- ❑ Luke's words here demonstrate the authentic nature of the peoples' confessions of Christ.

“Their divulging of spells is important, as one of the keys to magic is the secrecy and mystery behind the spells. Once made public, the spell is perceived to be impotent.” Darrell Bock

- ❑ Notice the **public** nature of the peoples' confessions demonstrate the sincerity of their act.
- ❑ A powerful truth of God is that He always acts clearly and publicly. However, Satan must use the unknown and the cloak of secrecy and darkness in order to accomplish his desired ends. Thus, since Satan, unlike God, is not sovereign, He cannot reveal Himself truthfully. Otherwise he would expose himself as a liar and counterfeit.
- ❑ No longer did these “former exorcists” seek to deceive others; rather, they sought to follow the one true God.

## b. The People Burn their Books

- Then, Luke writes, in **Verse 19**, “And many of those who practiced magic brought their books together and began burning them in the sight of everyone; and they counted up the price of them and found it fifty thousand pieces of silver.”
  - True conversion **always** involves confession of sin.
  - This stands as an example of our own conversion which involves both a denial [a denial/denunciation of sin] and an affirmation [belief *in* the Person and Work of Jesus Christ].
  - If each piece of silver constituted a drachma [a drachma was the most common Greek silver coin], then this would constitute \$35,000 in today’s American currency [“The Attic drachma contained 67.5 grains of silver, or approximately 14 percent of a troy ounce. With silver at \$5 a troy ounce, the drachma would contain about 70 cents in silver value.”]
  - Another way of looking at the cost of the books burned is in terms of standard of living. A drachma was typically understood as a day’s wage. Therefore, if one silver piece equaled one drachma [a day’s wages], then the cost of books burned would equal one man’s wages for **137 consecutive years** with absolutely no days off!
  - The exorbitant price of these books reveals the degree to which this commercial city had “bought into” occult practices and magic.
  - Furthermore, the abandoning of magical practices involved great sacrifice.

## c. The Word of the Lord Spreads

- Finally, Luke writes **Verse 20**, “So the word of the Lord was growing mightily and prevailing.”
  - The sons of Sceva deceptively sought to replicate the miracles of Paul through the use of the name of Jesus; however, their plan for self-glorification, once again, resulted in the spread of the word of the Lord.
- Luke states that the word of the Lord was growing *mightily* or *powerfully*. The Greek word here [*kratos*] denotes force, strength, power, or might.
- **The point that Luke is making here certainly is one that places the Word of the Lord in direct contrast to the works of the Jewish exorcists.**



- **The Jewish exorcists are impotent charlatans whose “power” is exposed and extinguished. Whereas, the Word of the Lord is mighty and “grows” and “prevails.”**

Therefore, we as Christians today must arrive at the point where we realize that that there is no power that is greater than the Gospel of the Christ, as revealed in God's Word. For it, and it alone, is the **very power of God Himself** unto salvation. We need not look to physical signs and wonders for “confirmation” or strength; rather, we should look no further than the pages of Scripture.