

Taking the City

Acts 19:8-20

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There are several instances in the Bible where we see the power of God stacked against the forces of evil. Probably my favorite is the story of Elijah vs. the prophets of Baal. In that account, Elijah challenged the worshipers of the false god Baal to a showdown to prove whose God was real. The prophets of Baal attempted to summon their god all day long to no avail. Then Elijah prayed for the Lord to reveal His power, and He sent fire from heaven that consumed Elijah's sacrifice as well as the sacrifice to Baal. The result was that God demonstrated definitively that He was real and powerful, and the people worshiping the false gods were discredited.

I believe we see something similar in our account today, although not in as direct a fashion. Our account today takes place in the city of Ephesus, which was a Roman port city with a huge population. It was also known for its incredible sinfulness. It was home to the temple of Artemis (or Diana), which was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. It was a massive structure, with 127 columns, each 60 feet high, covered by a massive marble roof. It was adorned with sculpture and art, a true sight to behold. Artemis was a fertility goddess, and people worshiped her by engaging in all manner of sinful activities. As such, Ephesus became a place plagued by evil. But Paul's time in the city was a battle that would topple the powers of darkness definitively.

This morning, we are going to look at Paul's time in Ephesus recorded in Acts 19. This was at the beginning of his third missionary journey, and we'll see how his faithful ministry opened doors for God to take the city for himself and to vanquish the forces of evil that were previously so prevalent.

Preaching Ministry

Luke described several scenes of Paul's time in Ephesus. The first focused primarily on his preaching and teaching ministry.

⁸ Then Paul went to the synagogue and preached boldly for the next three months, arguing persuasively about the Kingdom of God. ⁹ But some became stubborn, rejecting his message and publicly speaking against the Way. So Paul left the synagogue and took the believers with him. Then he held daily discussions at the lecture hall of Tyrannus. ¹⁰ This went on for the next two years, so that people throughout the province of Asia—both Jews and Greeks—heard the word of the Lord. (Acts 19:8-10, NLT)

When Paul arrived in Ephesus, he followed his usual pattern. He went to the synagogue and taught the people about God's plan and pointed to Jesus as the Messiah. After three months of doing this, it appears that Paul had made many converts, but also a fair number of enemies. Eventually, these enemies decided they needed to silence Paul, and they began causing problems for them in the synagogue. So Paul decided he would stop meeting at the synagogue and would come up with other arrangements instead.

He was not about to allow his ministry to be derailed by some thugs who were trying to silence him.

So instead, Paul began to hold daily discussions at the lecture hall of Tyrannus. We don't know a lot about Tyrannus, other than the fact that he was a philosopher and that his name means "the tyrant." One commentator observed that while the parents of some toddlers might describe their child as a tyrant, it is hard to imagine a parent choosing to name their child "the tyrant"—meaning this was a name that was likely given to him by his students!

Regardless of how Tyrannus got his name, he apparently had a large lecture hall. Based on the information we have available to us, most people assume that Paul rented the lecture hall in the middle of the day—the hours when Tyrannus would not have been using it, because everyone shut down working during the heat of the day. Paul may have met with people in the hall from about 11 AM until 4 PM each day.

We know from Paul's other writings that while he was in Ephesus, he did not ask for anything from the people. So, he likely spent his mornings and evenings making tents and spent the middle of the day teaching. Luke tells us that Paul spent two years working in this fashion, and by the end of that time people all across the province of Asia had heard him speak.

This was a significant departure from Paul's typical process to this point. Usually Paul came into a city, developed a core group of new believers, then left things in their hands while he moved on to the next town. Paul's commitment and dedication to the people of Ephesus shows how much he felt his time was warranted there.

Paul's choice to continue teaching the people each day reflects his recognition that he needed to help them build a strong foundation. He was not content to merely get them the basics and move on, he felt that it was necessary for him to take them deeper so they could stand up to the forces of evil that were buffeting the church.

We see this same attitude echoed in the book of Hebrews (which may or may not have been written by Paul, we aren't sure)

¹² You have been believers so long now that you ought to be teaching others. Instead, you need someone to teach you again the basic things about God's word. You are like babies who need milk and cannot eat solid food. ¹³ For someone who lives on milk is still an infant and doesn't know how to do what is right. ¹⁴ Solid food is for those who are mature, who through training have the skill to recognize the difference between right and wrong. (Hebrews 5:12-14, NLT)

The writer emphasizes what the normal pattern for the Christian should be. Christians should not only learn the basics of the Christian faith but should continue to grow deeper and stronger in the word and in their walk with Christ. Mature believers should be helping to reach and strengthen others. Here, he chastised the people because they were still drinking milk like babies, when they should have been eating solid food.

Babies need the basics. Milk provides that for them. But if a child wants to grow into all they can be, they must move beyond merely drinking milk and must learn to eat solid food and eventually, to feed themselves. It is the same spiritually. We all need to grasp the basics of the Christian faith, but if we never progress beyond that point, we will never become all God intends us to be. We must learn to dig deeper into God's Word, we must learn to feed ourselves, and then we must work to help others do the same.

Paul's investment in the Ephesian church sought to do exactly that, and it shows us how much importance he placed on this task. Paul wanted to ensure the people were on solid footing before he moved on.

This should drive us to a bit of self-examination. Are we continuing to grow in our faith, or have we become content with merely consuming milk? Have we learned to feed ourselves? Are we learning to wrestle with deeper questions and looking for ways to apply God's Word to our lives more completely? Many people in the church get excited about the faith for a while and then become stagnant. They stop growing, they stop stretching for the Lord, and they therefore become ineffective.

Don't allow yourself to become complacent in your faith. Don't be content to just know many of the Bible stories, or a few verses here and there. Keep working to understand more of God's Word. Study it on your own, work to put its teachings into practice in every area of your life, and work to find ways to share that same truth with others. This is the pattern all Christians should follow, but sadly many do not.

Unusual Miracles

The second scene of the story shows Paul performing some strange miracles.

¹¹ God gave Paul the power to perform unusual miracles. ¹² When handkerchiefs or aprons that had merely touched his skin were placed on sick people, they were healed of their diseases, and evil spirits were expelled. (Acts 19:11-12, NLT)

Luke tells us that during Paul's time working there, God enabled Paul to perform miracles at a distance as people used some of his work clothes (handkerchiefs which he would have used to dab sweat and aprons he would have worn while working) to perform healing miracles.

This is a strange occurrence, and even Luke makes that observation when he said that God enabled Paul to perform unusual miracles. Don't miss the significance of that statement. Miracles, by definition, are unusual occurrences. Luke says that these were unusual, unusual occurrences!

You may be familiar with people today who promise that if you send them money, they will send you articles of clothing or decorative handkerchiefs that have been prayed over and will provide special blessings. In most of these cases, the people are attempting to fleece people by preying on their desire for power and blessing.

What we see in Acts is nothing like that. Paul was not charging for this service, but God enabled Paul to perform all sorts of miracles that attracted the attention of others. In a city filled with darkness, God was using Paul as a light that spread far and wide.

This is a reminder as well that God is not limited in how He acts. God can work through even the most mundane of things to accomplish His purposes. There are few things more mundane than Paul's sweat rags, but God used even that to demonstrate His power. Do not underestimate the little things you can do and how God can use them for His glory and His purpose. This passage isn't teaching us how to make money by performing miracles but is showing us how God can work mightily through someone who is simply yielded to Him.

The Sons of Sceva

Immediately after this, we get to one of my favorite accounts in the book of Acts. Luke tells us about seven brothers, all of whom presented themselves as traveling exorcists. These men claimed to have spiritual powers, and would charge people for their services. Of course, their power was counterfeit. While they may have been able to effect some measure of change in people, it quickly became apparent that their power was nothing compared to the power Paul possessed.

Since they recognized the superiority of the work Paul was doing, they decided they would try to piggyback off his ministry and capitalize on his power for themselves. When they encountered a demon-possessed man, they went about their business, presumably chanting and doing some sort of ritual designed to gain power over the demons. Then they tried to cast out the demon, saying, "I command you in the name of Jesus, whom Paul preaches, to come out!" (v. 13) Unlike Paul, however, these men did not know Jesus and God was not working through them as He was through Paul. They were way out of their depth.

The demon knew this and responded by saying, "I know Jesus, and I know Paul, but who are you?" (v. 14). The man possessed by the evil spirit then leapt on them and beat them so severely that they ended up fleeing bloodied and naked! In that moment, they realized that they were not in the same league as Paul or the Jesus Paul preached.

I have often referenced this story through the years when students asked me about demonic forces and exorcisms. My point is to emphasize a couple important points. **First, spiritual forces are real.** Our modern society tends to downplay the influence of spiritual forces. We imagine that everything can be solved by medicine, therapy, or other means. But some issues are much deeper. There are evil spiritual forces at work in our world, and we must be aware of these things and recognize their power.

At the same time, we must be careful as we consider the spiritual realm. C.S. Lewis wrote a book called *The Screwtape Letters* in which he imagined conversations between an older, experienced demon with a younger demon. He imagined how they might plot ways to lead people astray and turn their attention from God. Lewis made a

statement that I think has great wisdom. He said that we can make two major mistakes when thinking about the demonic world. One is to ignore spiritual forces entirely, and the other is to become fixated on them. Lewis remarked that the demons will happily use either mistake to influence us. We must recognize that spiritual forces are real, but that not every issue is the result of demonic activity.

Second, it's that God is more powerful than these forces, we are not. Students often ask me about exorcisms and how you would go about trying to heal someone of demonic influences. Popular media depicts certain rituals or incantations people use in hopes of controlling demons. I always point to the sons of Sceva as evidence for the foolishness of this approach. Jesus is more powerful than demons—we are not. We must not imagine that if we say the right words or do the right things, then we can control evil forces. We cannot. But the Holy Spirit resides within us, and we have power that comes from prayer and submission to Him. True power comes by submitting to Christ and asking for His help. The way to fight spiritual battles is not with words or rituals, it is with prayer and submission to God.

Aftermath

The result of Paul's time in Ephesus was that slowly but surely people began to see the futility of their current way of life. Paul served as a light in a dark place, and eventually the people began to see that there was another, better option available to them.

¹⁷ The story of what happened spread quickly all through Ephesus, to Jews and Greeks alike. A solemn fear descended on the city, and the name of the Lord Jesus was greatly honored. ¹⁸ Many who became believers confessed their sinful practices. ¹⁹ A number of them who had been practicing sorcery brought their incantation books and burned them at a public bonfire. The value of the books was several million dollars. ²⁰ So the message about the Lord spread widely and had a powerful effect. (Acts 19:17-20, NLT)

People began to honor the name of Jesus. There began to be a spiritual revival in the city where people came and repented of their sinful practices. Many chose to turn from their lives of sin, coming and burning their cultic texts, and choosing to submit to Christ instead.

This account provides great hope to me, because I suspect many of us often feel that we are living in a dark land, a place where people have descended into such worldly and evil pursuits that they don't even recognize how lost they are. That was the case in the city of Ephesus. But Paul's faithful and continued work began to turn on the light around them. This change didn't happen overnight, but Paul worked diligently, doing everything he could to teach people about Jesus and demonstrating the difference of the Christian life, as compared to the world around him.

We'll see next week that the battle wasn't over. Not everyone followed Jesus. But a significant battle had been won because of Paul's consistent and faithful service. Do not become weary in your work for the Lord. A person who is yielded to the Lord, growing in faith, and working to put His Word into practice in every area of their life will eventually

start to attract attention. Maybe we won't be able to perform the miracles that Paul did, but God can work just as powerfully through you and me as He did through Paul. But we must be yielded to Him. If we do that, we can see Him take back our cities, our nation, and our world, just as He did in Ephesus.

Conclusion

So, as we conclude today, what lessons or applications can we take from this account? **First, we must remember that we are fighting a spiritual battle.** Paul pointed out in his letter to the Ephesians that the battle they were fighting was spiritual in nature. As such, he told them that fighting with worldly weapons and tactics wouldn't work. Instead, they needed to fight the real issue—people needed to know Christ and come to submit to Him. Media pundits today earn a following by pointing to all sorts of things as the real problem with our society, but almost universally they miss the point. There is a spiritual battle being waged, and the weapons we must use are not worldly nor political, nor do they require us to violate the commands of Christ. The battle must be fought on a spiritual plane, not merely a physical one. We must point people to Jesus, not our platforms.

Second, the battle starts with us. We like to imagine that the problems we see in our world are all caused by everyone else. We tend to be blind to the ways in which we are contributing to the darkness. Take a hard look at your life and ask if you are truly submitting your life to Christ. Are you seeking to obey Him in every area? Or are there places where you act as though He doesn't exist? If we want to see our world submit to Christ, we need to start by submitting to Him ourselves.

Finally, significant changes rarely happen overnight. Paul spent two years ministering in Ephesus before he saw this groundswell of repentance happen. We have become impatient. We try something, and if we don't see immediate results, we assume it isn't working. We get sidetracked onto something more exciting and end up constantly chasing something that feels like it "works". I think this is why Jesus often used the analogy of farming to describe the Christian life. A good chunk of farming is doing things you know are right even though you can't really see the progress. I think that's a good description of our walk with the Lord as well. We should be working to be more obedient to the Lord, working to grow in our knowledge and understanding of His Word, seeking Him consistently in prayer, and seeking to point others to Him. Many of these things aren't flashy—they probably won't attract much attention in the eyes of others—at least initially. But over time, they will yield results for the Kingdom of God. We must learn to be faithful in the small things, because they will eventually lead to big results.

God showed up mightily in Ephesus, decisively demonstrating His power over the forces of evil at work in the city. But the reason this happened was because Paul, and presumably other believers, had been faithful in the little things. If we want to see a change in our community, in our nation, and in our world, we must follow the same pattern. Change starts with us working to be faithful to our Lord. If we are consistent in that, we will see His power unleashed all around us.

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