

The Book of Acts: The Spirit Moving

The Word of The Lord Prevails / Acts 19:8-20 / March 29, 2026

Introduction:

Back when I worked as a server in a restaurant, one of the things that we were trained to do was how to identify counterfeit bills before accepting cash as a form of payment. Usually, we would only check the 50's or 100-dollar bills, and there were several different methods we could use to do so. Of course, we used the counterfeit-detecting pen that changed the color of the ink depending upon whether or not a bill was genuine. There was also a UV light box that was able to illuminate security threads embedded into an authentic bill. But as we went through this training, one of the easiest ways to tell the difference between a real and fake note was simply to have a genuine one and compare it to a fake one. Holding both in your hands at the same time, noticing the details and built-in features, even just how the paper felt between your fingers, made it easy to know which one was the real deal. Here's my point in telling you this: a lie, no matter how convincing that lie is, can eventually be rooted out when the truth confronts it. In today's passage, that is exactly what we're going to see. Picking up where we left off last week, Luke's account of Paul's ministry in the city of Ephesus continues. He had just corrected and converted 12 disciples and, in regular Pauline fashion, entered into the local synagogue. Ephesus was another city known for its wealth and influence, but it was also known for its deep entanglement with magic, idolatry, and the worship of the goddess Artemis. Paul would not find neutral ground here. This was a place where spiritual power was taken seriously, although deeply misunderstood. And into that environment, the gospel comes, not as one option among many, but as truth that confronts everything else... and prevails!

Acts 19:8-9

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.

Paul begins, as he often does, in the synagogue. For three months, Luke tells us, he speaks boldly, using his usual methods of reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God. He is dialoguing, explaining, answering questions, attempting to impress the truth about Christ into minds and hearts. This sustained engagement with the Jews of Ephesus is the longest stint that Paul would do in a synagogue, and it is also the last time. But then something happens. "Some became stubborn and continued in unbelief, speaking evil of the Way before the congregation." Notice the progression: they are exposed to truth, they resist truth, they are hardened against truth, and finally are opposed to truth. Notice their response as well: they are "speaking evil of the Way". First of all, what a cool name for Christianity. But second, their "speaking evil" is another way of saying they were lying about what Paul was teaching. This is a sobering reality. The same message that softens some hearts will harden others, and, like before, Paul recognizes he must go elsewhere. He withdraws and takes the disciples with him, reasoning daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. But look what happens next. Any lies that may have been spread about Christianity don't stick, and the truth prevails over the evil spoken about it.

Acts 19:10

¹⁰ This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.

Surely, if the lies of the Jews about Christ persisted, Paul would not have been able to continue to lecture for two years, and neither would have the word of the Lord spread like wildfire all across the province of Asia. Some manuscripts of Acts add that he lectured from the fifth hour to the tenth, meaning from 11am to 4pm during what's known as the Mediterranean siesta, when the working class would take a break from their labor to rest. Likely, this would have meant that Paul would make tents all morning, go to his daily teaching for 5 hours, and then go back to his work for a few hours until the day was over. He would work and teach about Jesus 6 days a week for two years straight. That's 3,120 hours of teaching. Let that sink in. Paul's ministry consisted of daily investment, hard work, and persistent faithfulness to the mission of God, and because of it, the gospel spread. It didn't spread because Paul personally traveled everywhere, but because disciples were made who carried the message outward. This is the ordinary means by which God powerfully does His work: the kingdom multiplies through faithful discipleship. This is slow, steady, powerful work. And it starts with teaching. Do you desire to see the kingdom of God grow? Are there people in your life that you know who need to hear the message of salvation? The self-sacrificial labor of teaching others about Jesus is part of what it means to do ministry, and we are all called to that endeavor to the glory of God. Although teaching and discipleship and laboring for the sake of others is the regular means by which God accomplishes his purposes, it is sometimes the Lord's prerogative to sovereignly use extraordinary means to reach the lost.

Acts 19:11–12

The Sons of Sceva

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.

Now, when Luke calls these miracles extraordinary, as if a miracle isn't extraordinary enough, what he means is that these are not normally how God dispenses the miraculous. He tells us that the miracles by the hands of Paul became so prevalent that even handkerchiefs or aprons, likely articles of clothing he used to keep the sweat out of his face while he worked, were carried away to the sick who were then healed, and the possessed who were then freed from evil spirits. These are unique moments where God is demonstrating His power in unmistakable ways. So why does God choose to work in this way for these people? It was a common superstition in the ancient world that pieces of clothing from a miracle worker contained power. This happens another time in scripture when a woman who had a chronic illness had faith that she would be healed if she only touched the fringes of Jesus' cloak. The people of Ephesus, likewise, shared in that superstition. Remember, Ephesus was saturated with counterfeit spiritual power. Magic, spells, incantations; people believed in power, but they were trusting the wrong sources. So what does this mean? Are holy relics and magical items a reality? Was that televangelist telling the truth when he sent me a blessed handkerchief that had been dipped in the Jordan River and could bring healing after I donated \$30??

“Paul was not selling his handkerchiefs or socks or aprons to the local faithful. They were “borrowing” them and applying them to the sick. And God, at this critical juncture in the church’s history, being a God of incredible patience and grace, met these people on their own level with bona fide miracles, accommodating himself to their uninstructed faith.”

R. Kent Hughes, Acts: The Church Afire

So God makes something unmistakably clear: His power is not manipulated. His power is not bought. His power is not controlled. It is given freely, and it is done so by His own will and for His own good pleasure. The objects mentioned, the handkerchiefs and the aprons, are not magical. They are reminders that the power comes from God, not from methods. True power, God’s power, was real and good and true, and it flew in the face of the false, occult practices of the Ephesians. Practices that were often used for financial gain, such as becoming an exorcist. It is into that arena that God will now dramatically display His power to confront deeply rooted deception.

Acts 19:13–16

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.

Although there are no Jewish records of a high priest named Sceva who served during this time period, commentators believe the man’s title of “high priest” came from being a well-known spiritist and exorcist, a financially lucrative profession, with his seven sons following him into the family business. Exorcists back then would appeal to any spirit or use incantations that they thought were powerful enough to drive out evil spirits from the possessed. Notice that these 7 exorcists are trying to use the name of Christ as an incantation or a tool. It is not the Jesus that they know that they call upon, but “the Jesus that Paul proclaims.” And then the evil spirit answers. “Jesus I know, and Paul I recognize, but who are you?” Their utter lack of authority is even more amplified when the man with the evil spirit leaps on them, masters them, and they flee out of the house naked, wounded, and ashamed. Their humiliation exposes their impotence and spiritual weakness. Here’s the truth: The name of Jesus, when true faith is applied, is not a formula for spiritual power; it is authority. And that authority is not accessed through imitation, but through relationship. You cannot borrow spiritual power, and you cannot fake spiritual authority. You cannot treat Jesus as a technique to get what you want. Either you belong to Him, or you don’t. And you can be sure that the spiritual realm knows the difference.

Acts 19:17–19

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.

How powerful was the name of Jesus to these people that they would be moved to do such a thing? These new believers, convicted and corrected by the things that had occurred before their very eyes, brought forth those things once thought so precious to them to be burned to nothing as a symbol of their repentance and faith in Christ. Imagine for a moment this massive bonfire of magic spells reaching up into the heavens. The value is enormous; fifty thousand pieces of silver or, to us, the equivalent of millions of dollars. This is no symbolic gesture of repentance; this is costly. They are not trying to manage their sin; they are destroying it, cutting ties with that which is false and clinging to the truth. This very real repentance is demonstrated both inwardly and outwardly. It changes the heart, and it changes behavior. It costs them heavily, and they do it gladly because there is no other name but Jesus in which victory can be found. 2000 years ago, outside the gates of Jerusalem, the Jews welcomed Jesus with open arms, expecting Him to be the Messiah that they had envisioned in their minds. They imagined a king who would come with a sword and with great power and might, that king would sweep away all of Israel's enemies by waging war against those who would oppose her. But instead of killing, Jesus would suffer and die. In their disappointment, they probably thought Him weak, unworthy of the crown and title they were so eager to give Him. Behold the power and might and glory of the risen King Jesus. He who cuts down lies about Himself and His salvation. His authority and dominion cast out the corruption of our sin in this world, banishing disease and causing the demonic to flee. Time and again, He wages war on the battlefield of our hearts, causing us to willingly and happily surrender our sin and lay it at His feet. He does indeed claim victory over the enemies of His people: not Roman rule, but the darkness and evil that has infected every part of this world.

Ephesians 6:12

¹² 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.

For the Ephesians, following Christ meant turning away from practices that had once defined their identity and livelihood. And they did it publicly. Why? Because when you see the true power of Christ, counterfeit power loses its grip and the darkness is laid bare for what it truly is: hollow, empty, and worthless in comparison to knowing our Savior and Lord. Luke summarizes this entire section with one powerful statement:

Acts 19:20

²⁰ So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily.

Notice what Luke points to as the point of importance: it is not power encounters, miracles of healing, or authority over the demonic. No, because of what has happened, it is the word of the Lord, knowledge of King Jesus, and the gospel of His salvation that increases and prevails mightily. Prevail. It means overcoming resistance. It means advancing through victorious opposition. It means winning. The Word of God is not fragile. It does not depend on favorable conditions. It advances in the face of hardness of heart, spiritual deception, demonic conflict, and cultural resistance. This is our confidence: The gospel does not merely survive, it prevails, ultimately pointing us to the supremacy of Jesus. He is not one name

among many. He is not one power among many. He is Lord. He has authority over sickness, over demons, over sin, and over death. And through the sacrifice of His death and the power of His resurrection, He has secured victory, not just in Ephesus, but for all who trust in Him for the forgiveness of their sins and the hope of eternal life. The same power that exposes darkness, transforms hearts, and rescues the lost is the same power that saves today. Let me ask you a few questions: Are you battling against deception in your heart, believing in something that you know isn't true? Have you grown lazy in your faith and become unwilling to do more for the Kingdom of God? Is there anything in your life that you are trusting as a source of power apart from Christ? Or maybe you're guilty of trying to use the name of Jesus without surrendering all of yourself to Him? Is there anything you are holding onto that you need to burn, something that's holding you back from a deeper walk with your savior? The only response that will free you from that bondage is to repent. Cry out to Jesus today; confess your sin, turn away from those things, and trust in His forgiveness. Don't settle for surface-level, low effort, shallow Christianity. Do not treat Jesus as a tool. Do not hold onto what He calls you to leave behind. Through Christ, renew your confidence in this: that the word of the Lord still prevails. I hope today's passage reminds you of the reality of what the Christian life is: waging spiritual war against the enemy. Truth collides with deception, real power confronts counterfeit power, the name of Jesus exposes empty imitation, and in the end, it is Christ who claims victory over and over and beckons us today to come to Him fully. Trust Him completely. Follow Him faithfully. Because when Christ is truly seen for who He is, nothing else could ever take His place.