



Catalog No. 1272

Acts 19:8-41

Thirtieth Message

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April 9th, 2006

THE POWER AND PERIL OF THE GOSPEL

SERIES: THE SPREADING FLAME

In Acts 19, Luke gives a fascinating account of how the gospel reached and affected an entire city, and even its surrounding province, through a relatively small group of Christians.

Ephesus was located in a strategic place, where the Cayster River flows into the Aegean Sea. In New Testament times, the city was known as the “Treasure House of Asia,” because it commanded all the trade into the river valley of the rich province of Asia Minor. Like Corinth, Ephesus was a prosperous center of trade and commerce.

The city was also the site of the Temple of Artemis (Diana), one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Its 127 marble pillars were inlaid with gold and rare gems. The temple was 425 feet long, 220 feet wide and 60 feet high. Displayed inside was the pride of Ephesus – the multi-breasted carved image of Artemis, which was thought to have fallen from the heavens. Ritual prostitution was practiced in the temple. The city became a center for witchcraft, a watering hole for magicians, witches, warlocks and others who practiced the black arts and astrology.

So it was to this city that the apostle came and there assaulted the strongholds of evil with the weapons of spiritual warfare. Later in his letter to the church in Corinth he would write, “We use God’s mighty weapons, not mere worldly weapons, to knock down the Devil’s strongholds. With these weapons we break down every proud argument that keeps people from knowing God. With these weapons we conquer their rebellious ideas, and we teach them to obey Christ” (2 Cor 10:4-5). And in his letter to the Ephesians he said, “For we are not fighting against people made of flesh and blood, but against the evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against those mighty powers of darkness who rule this world, and against wicked spirits in the heavenly realms” (Eph 6:12).

Paul’s assault on the evil powers in Ephesus begins with the weapon of truth. As was his usual custom, he starts in the synagogue.

And he entered the synagogue and continued speaking out boldly for three months, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God. But when some were becoming hardened and disobedient, speaking evil of the Way before the multitude, he withdrew from them and took away the disciples, reasoning daily in the school of Tyrannus. And this took place for two years, so that all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks. (Acts 19:8-10 NASB)

In this synagogue in Ephesus, Paul had one of his longest hearings, lasting three months. Earlier, Luke had made a brief stop there at the end of his second missionary journey. He was asked to stay but declined. Although there was initial interest in Paul’s message, after awhile it was the same old tune of resistance and persecution. Paul withdrew from the synagogue and made arrangements to continue the dialogue with all who were interested in a hall he rented from a man named Tyrannus, probably a local philosopher or educator who lectured there during the cool hours of the morning and then rented out his lecture hall in the heat of the day. Since his name literally means “tyrant,” one wonders if it was given to him by his students and not his parents.

Some manuscripts add that Paul preached from the fifth hour to the tenth, that is, from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Their workday began at 7 a.m.; they broke at 11, and then continued from 4 p.m. until 8 or 9 p.m. Evidently Paul made tents in the morning hours. He taught from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m., and then went back to work. Later he would write to the Ephesian elders, “You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs.” What a killer schedule! But religion in Ephesus was big business. The apostle wanted to keep himself above suspicion that he was in it for the money. He paid his own way, teaching five hours a day for two years. If he taught six days a week, 50 weeks a year, that’s 3,120 hours. That would be like teaching 24 hours a day for 130 days! He probably taught all the great truths that we have in his letters.

Imagine hearing the apostle teach the great truths of Romans, Ephesians and Galatians. His teaching had a tremendous impact, so much so that “all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.” That was an entire province, an area larger than the state of California, with many cities. Now it wasn’t Paul who did this. It was ordinary people who upon hearing him lecture every day were captivated and galvanized by these truths and began to spread the word throughout the whole area. All roads in Asia converged in Ephesus. Everyone visited the city from time to time to buy or sell, visit a relative, frequent the baths, attend the games in the stadium, watch a drama in the theatre or worship the goddess. While there, they heard of this Christian lecturer named Paul, who was both speaking and answering questions for five hours in the middle of the day. Evidently many dropped in, listened, and were converted. They then returned to their towns and villages as born-again believers. So the gospel spread to the

Lycus valley and to its chief towns, Colosse, Laodicea and Hierapolis.

In two years this whole province had been reached by the gospel. Isn't that amazing? During this time, all the seven churches identified in Revelation 2 and 3, as well as many others, came into being. What happened during these two years was simply amazing, and demonstrates the power of the word of God.

Luke goes on to say that God confirmed the spoken word with signs and wonders:

And 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. (19:11-12)

The advance of the gospel was accompanied by unusual miracles. The text literally says, "miracles, not the ordinary." Some of these manifestations were direct, coming through the hands of Paul. Others were indirect, being mediated through articles of clothing that, when applied to the sick, brought healing.

There was nothing magic in this. This text has been abused over the years by religious charlatans. They will send you a specially blessed handkerchief that has been dipped in the Jordan River, that when prayerfully applied will bring healing – at a cost of only 15 dollars! Paul wasn't selling articles of clothing. People were borrowing them and applying them to those who were sick, and God, at this important period in the Church's history, being a God of incredible mercy and grace, met these people at their level of simple faith with genuine miracles. The full meaning of these indirect miracles is connected with God's view of Paul's costly self-sacrificial labor for Christ.

The handkerchiefs were literally "sweat rags" – sweatbands, we would say, cloths that Paul tied around his head as he worked to keep the sweat from running into his eyes. The aprons were those he wore while working on leather and making tents. These were items that were associated with the labor, toil and sweat that he went through to make the gospel available free of charge. These became symbols which God chose to use to emphasize the characteristics of the apostle which made him such a channel of the power of God. They were symbols of his integrity, transparency, sacrifice, honesty and humility to work at a lowly trade, and his servant heart, which both revealed and released God's power.

But the demonstration of that kind of power usually attracts the counterfeit. Itinerant Jewish exorcists roamed the world at that time offering to rid people of evil spirits. The profession had become a source of revenue, and the dark city of Ephesus attracted many of these kinds of people. Luke goes on to tell the story of the seven sons of a priest named Sceva, who after seeing the miracles in Paul's ministry tried to emulate the power by exorcising a demon, using Jesus' name, without personal belief in the Savior. To this secondhand pretense of power the evil spirit responded: "I recognize Jesus, and I know about

Paul, but who are you?" The evil spirit saw through the self-serving exploitation of these men. The possessed man whom they tried to exploit with their counterfeit power, turned on them and beat them badly, and they fled naked and injured.

This exposure of the difference between the magic and miracles had a profound effect on the entire city. It was the cause of a moral reform.

and fear fell upon them all and the name of the Lord Jesus was being magnified. Many also of those who had believed kept coming, confessing and disclosing their practices. And many of those who practiced magic brought their books together and began burning them in the sight of all; and they counted up the price of them and found it fifty thousand pieces of silver. So the word of the Lord was growing mightily and prevailing. (19:17b-20)

Those who had become Christians now confessed their false dependence on magic. They brought their magic books, horoscopes, cult manuals and occult literature and burned them in a public display of their total dependence on Jesus Christ. Here in Ephesus, Paul and the other Christians, by the power of the truth, assaulted this stronghold of evil. They cracked it wide open, so that Luke says, "The word of the Lord grew and prevailed mightily," and the city was shaken to its core.

Luke has one more picture from Paul's lengthy ministry in Ephesus. Things became even more difficult because of the way the gospel had attacked the forces of evil in this city.

And about that time there arose no small disturbance concerning the Way. For a certain man named Demetrius, a silversmith, who made silver shrines of Artemis, was bringing no little business to the craftsmen; these he gathered together with the workmen of similar trades, and said, "Men, you know that our prosperity depends upon this business. And you see and hear that not only in Ephesus, but in almost all of Asia, this Paul has persuaded and turned away a considerable number of people, saying that gods made with hands are no gods at all. And not only is there danger that this trade of ours fall into disrepute, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis be regarded as worthless and that she whom all of Asia and the world worship should even be dethroned from her magnificence." (19:23-27)

There was a disturbance, started by a man named Demetrius, a silversmith, concerning "the Way," which is the term Christians used to describe themselves. They never called themselves Christians; that was the word that non-believers used to describe believers.

Most of the worship in Ephesus centered on the goddess Artemis, or Diana, as she was known by the Romans. The temple rivaled the Parthenon in beauty, but it was about four times larger. People came from all over the Roman Empire to view this magnificent structure. Idolatry was big business. The economy of Ephesus depended on the temple of Artemis for its stability. Enter Demetrius, president of Silversmiths Local

666. He and the other silversmiths who lived there were involved in making little trinkets or souvenirs, silver models of Artemis and terra cotta models of the temple, to sell to tourists. Some models have actually been unearthed, so we know what they looked like.

The moral transformation that was taking place in Ephesus as a result of the power of the gospel cut to the core the silver shrine business. The preaching of the apostle Paul in the Hall of Tyrannus, the response of Christians to that teaching, their godly behavior, their proclamation of the gospel in Ephesus, the miracles that were taking place, all of these were causing the business of these silversmiths to decline. People were not buying their junk, and it was hurting them financially.

So Demetrius assembles all the silversmiths (apparently he was the head of this guild), and announces that the apostle Paul was hurting their business. But when he makes his broader appeal to the people, he doesn't reveal that motive. It isn't smart to appeal to selfish motives; even non-Christians know that. Making his appeal, he cries out that it is Artemis that is at stake. It's a religious issue, he says. But his motive is purely selfish. He doesn't care about the people of Ephesus or the worship of Artemis. It's also possible that all of this took place during a month-long religious festival in Ephesus honoring Artemis, a time when the silversmiths would realize what a threat Christianity was to their business. If that was the case, Demetrius wouldn't have a problem getting a crowd together. He stirs the people up and a riot ensues.

And when they heard this and were filled with rage, they began crying out, saying, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" And the city was filled with the confusion, and they rushed with one accord into the theater, dragging along Gaius and Aristarchus, Paul's traveling companions from Macedonia. (19:28-29)

Demetrius's friends take up the ritual chant, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians! and soon multitudes start pouring down the Arcadian Way. The magnificent boulevard ran straight through the city, connecting the harbor with the great amphitheatre that seated almost 25,000 people. (Both the road and the theatre have now been restored.) The mob probably couldn't find Paul, so they sweep up his two friends and drag them to the theater.

And when Paul wanted to go into the assembly, the disciples would not let him. And also some of the Asiarchs who were friends of his sent to him and repeatedly urged him not to venture into the theater. So then, some were shouting one thing and some another, for the assembly was in confusion, and the majority did not know for what cause they had come together. And some of the crowd concluded it was Alexander, since the Jews had put him forward; and having motioned with his hand, Alexander was intending to make a defense to the assembly. But when they recognized that he was a Jew, a single outcry arose from them

all as they shouted for about two hours, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" (19:30-34)

The mob is in a frenzy, totally beyond reason, shouting their slogans. Confusion reigned and continued for two solid hours. Riots are frightening occurrences. People are capable of things as a group that they would never do as individuals. Imagine shouting, "Great are 49ers of San Francisco!" for two hours without a break! It was wild event. It was quite courageous and noble of Paul to want to rescue his friends, but the Christians in Ephesus prevented him from going. Even the Asiarchs, who weren't Christians (they were the nobility of the city), urged him not to venture into the crowd. The mob would have killed these men if someone had made a wrong move. This was a terrifying scene.

But after a time they shouted themselves hoarse, and began to quiet down.

And after quieting the multitude, the town clerk said, "Men of Ephesus, what man is there after all who does not know that the city of the Ephesians is guardian of the temple of the great Artemis, and of the image which fell down from heaven? Since then these are undeniable facts, you ought to keep calm and to do nothing rash. (19:35-36)

His point is that if Artemis is as powerful as they thought, she can defend herself. Then he appeals to their senses.

For you have brought these men here who are neither robbers of temples nor blasphemers of our goddess. So then, if Demetrius and the craftsmen who are with him have a complaint against any man, the courts are in session and proconsuls are available; let them bring charges against one another. But if you want anything beyond this, it shall be settled in the lawful assembly. For indeed we are in danger of being accused of a riot in connection with today's affair, since there is no real cause for it; and in this connection we shall be unable to account for this disorderly gathering." And after saying this he dismissed the assembly. (19:37-41)

Rome ruled during this time, and the Peace of Rome, *Pax Romana*, was enforced without partiality. What this town clerk said made a lot of sense. If they were guilty of civil disobedience, the Romans would enact a state of emergency and shut them down. So the assembly left the theatre and the Church was able to go on and function in that city.

Thus the gospel captured the city of Ephesus. The preaching of the good news of the gospel: Jesus Christ crucified, buried, risen and present in power had made inroads into a city gripped by materialism and cults of every imaginable kind. The "Treasure House of Asia" now had real treasure for the first time.

Finally, a couple of observations on this chapter.

This passage reminds us that we have an enemy. He isn't our boss, or our mate, but a spiritual enemy. The scriptures clearly teach that our lives are part of a transcendent drama.

We are actors; the world is the stage. Behind the scenes, Satan, a master puppeteer, manipulates things for his own advantage. Scripture describes him as the “god of this world.” He is an evil, vicious enemy, out to destroy mankind. He is a malicious killer, “a liar and a murderer,” said Jesus. His goal is destruction, his method is deception. He kills and murders to get back at God. As Christians, we must accept the fact that there is a personal devil. Our Lord himself had a very sincere belief in Satan, whose name is mentioned 29 times in the gospels, 27 times by the Lord.

Until Paul’s arrival, Satan held Ephesus in bondage. People lived in fear and darkness, indulging their lusts in painful, degrading practices. Satan is alive and well in this valley, too. Ephesus had its own belief in magic, and we have ours today. The magic of money, or power, or possessions, or human capability dominate many of us. In this valley we are called to battle the stronghold of darkness with spiritual weapons of love, truth and righteousness.

The second thing I want to say is that when we reach out and get involved in other peoples’ lives, modeling and speaking the gospel of the grace of God, there will be a reaction. If there is never any reaction we ought to be concerned. When Paul entered a city proclaiming the message of grace, it often started either a riot or a revival, sometimes both, like it did in Ephesus.

As we think about how to penetrate our world for Jesus Christ, to bring light and love into the darkness of our campus, workplace or neighborhood, let me suggest two ways we can make a difference. First, we need to live the gospel in our character. Jesus said we are both salt and light. It doesn’t take a great deal of salt and light to affect a larger sphere. A little bit of salt permeates a large mass; a little bit of light can illuminate a large room. We are inclined to think that there is power only in numbers, but that isn’t so. Conversely, we tend to be intimidated when we are the only person in our sphere of influence who is living out the life of God. We need not be. Paul was simply using his gift of teaching for five hours a day in the Hall of Tyrannus, and yet the effect of this one man’s life was being felt throughout that whole region as people came to Christ.

One of the ways we make an impact is simply by living openly in front of people, letting our light shine, being ethical in our business practices. We disqualify ourselves if we are unscrupulous in our dealings, if our attitude is gain at all costs, or if we are not serving our employers well, giving them an honest day’s work, the very best of our time and energy and thought. Nothing is more devastating than duplicity in our Christian lives. Our authority flows from our obedience. Now this doesn’t mean we have to be perfect, because we are not. It means that the attitude of our heart is one of hungering after righteousness. We need to be real and authentic, living out the life of the indwelling Christ.

And secondly, we not only live out that life, we need to tell people. It’s interesting that Demetrius commented on what Paul was saying. The apostle wasn’t merely living it; he was speaking, telling people that the gods made with human hands are not gods at all. That’s what we need to be telling people. That’s what they need to hear. The problem is that man-made gods bring pleasure, but no joy. There is a difference. One lasts: pleasure doesn’t endure, but joy does. The reason that man-made gods – clothes, cars, houses and those sorts of things – are so tempting is that they are so pleasurable. But the pleasure doesn’t endure. People are looking for joy. It is such a privilege to model before them and then tell them at the right time and place that the things they are worshipping, the things that they are pursuing, will never satisfy them, but God will. That is our message. We need to tell people.

A couple of weeks ago, I asked you to ask God to bring to your mind someone to share the gospel with. I asked you to make a commitment to take that person to lunch and share your story. I say this not to make you feel guilty but to remind you, because some of you have told me that God has put a name on your mind. That’s why we’re here, why we exist – to rescue people out of the bondage of Satan. All of their man-made gods, all the magic of money doesn’t satisfy, but God does. He is alive. That’s what we celebrate this Holy Week as we focus on the wonder and beauty of Jesus’ crucifixion, burial, resurrection and ascension. Allow him to speak to you this week. Continue to ask God for someone you can share the gospel with and tell the story of what God has done in your life.

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