



# NOT BY MIGHT, NOR BY POWER, BUT BY MY SPIRIT

SERIES: LIFE UNLEASHED

Acts 19:8–21  
41st Message  
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Happy Mother’s Day to all our mothers in the congregation. On this day we typically celebrate the gift of mothers—the joy and miracle of birth, the sacrificial nurture and unending demands that go with it, and the immeasurable and often under appreciated influence “mothers” have on our lives. On the other hand, we also acknowledge the pain of motherhood, as the Lord said to our first mother, “in pain you shall bring forth children” (Gen 3:16). The term connotes not only physical pain, but also the inner grieving and sorrow that comes from toilsome labor and loss that mothers experience in raising their children. We also acknowledge that the “pain” is compounded for those who long to be mothers, but have never had the opportunity because they were barren or never married. But the good news is that in God’s kingdom “pain” never has the last word.

When Israel was exiled in Babylon, Zion was described as a bereaved mother with no one to comfort her for the loss of her children. The nation’s loss was massive, profound and unspeakable. Israel’s prophets were not shy in acknowledging the pain and announced that days were coming out of the pain of exile and loss when God would pour out his Spirit, bringing new life and fertility at unprecedented levels. As Isaiah writes,

Do not be afraid, Jacob, my servant,  
Jeshurun (“upright”), whom I have chosen.  
For I will pour water on the thirsty land,  
and streams on the dry ground;  
I will pour out my Spirit on your offspring,  
and my blessing on your descendants.  
They will spring up like grass in a meadow,  
like poplar trees by flowing streams. (Isa 44:2a–4 NIV)  
Then you will say in your heart:  
‘Who bore me these?  
I was bereaved and barren,  
I was exiled and rejected,  
Who brought these up?  
I was left all alone,  
but these—where have they come from?’”  
This is what the Sovereign LORD says:  
“See, I will beckon the nations,  
I will lift up my banner to the peoples;  
they will bring your sons in their arms,  
and carry your daughters on their hips. (Isa 49:21–22 NIV)  
Then you will look and be radiant,  
your heart will throb and swell with joy;  
the wealth of the seas will be brought to you,  
to you the riches of the nations will come.” (Isa 60:5 NIV)

Two weeks ago we resumed our studies in the book of Acts and celebrated the gift of the Spirit poured out afresh on twelve disciples, as Paul began his ministry in Ephesus. Today we will witness the power of God’s Spirit as it is unleashed and confronts the magical, political and religious powers that made Ephesus the greatest commercial center west of the Taurus Mountains. This will be the climax of Paul’s public ministry and his most productive time, as he proclaims the gospel in Ephesus for almost three years.

## I. The Failure of Direct Opposition (19:8–12)

### A. Rejection leads to a wider door of opportunity (19:8–10)

And he entered the synagogue and for three months spoke boldly, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God. But when some became stubborn (lit. “hardened themselves”) 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. This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks. (19:8–10 ESV)

When Paul first visited Ephesus on his second missionary journey, the Jewish community received him well and, desiring to hear more of what he had to say, they asked him to stay longer (18:18–19). But Paul, was committed to paying his vows in Jerusalem to give public thanks for God’s faithfulness, and therefore declined. Now a year later, Paul returns to an eager audience and is able to speak boldly for three months “reasoning and persuading them” that the kingdom of God has arrived in the person of Jesus.

This is the longest hearing Paul experienced in any synagogue. But inevitably, resistance arose and escalated into vicious slander from those in authority, who “hardened themselves” and continued in their unbelief, demonstrating a complete rejection of Paul’s message.

The term *σκληρύνω* “harden” is significant for, as Keener notes, it evokes the memory of “God’s hardening Pharaoh’s heart to fulfill God’s purpose (Exod 10:1),”<sup>1</sup> and similarly, as a result of this hardening, God will accomplish even greater work of salvation. Facing of severe hostility, Paul took his new disciples and left the synagogue to look for a more hospitable venue. Shut out from the synagogue, God opened a wider door for the gospel in the rented lecture hall of Tyrannus.

*Tyrannos* (τύραννος) means “tyrant,” so we can’t be sure if this is name of the hall, or a nickname the students gave the teacher. As Keener notes, “Professors of rhetoric were often demanding and were known to berate and beat unprepared students.”<sup>2</sup> As Ephesus was a center of rhetoric and debate, this would prove to be an ideal setting for Paul to engage his hearers with his reasoned and persuasive arguments. F. F. Bruce explains,

The Western text indicates that Paul had use of the building from 11 AM to 4 PM. Tyrannus, no doubt, would have conducted his lectures in the early morning. Public activity ceased in the cities of Ionia for several hours at 11 AM, and more people would be asleep at 1 AM than at 11 AM.<sup>3</sup>

But Paul did not sleep. After rising early to make tents for several hours, he went to the hall and lectured tirelessly for five hours, keeping all comers wide-awake with his reasoned passion and skilled rhetoric. Paul did this for two years. If you work out the math, assuming Paul rested on the Sabbath, he delivered “a five-hour lecture six days a week for two years, which makes 3,120 hours of gospel argument.”<sup>4</sup> It’s no wonder that, as Luke writes, “all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord.” As John Stott explains,

All the roads of Asia converged on Ephesus, and all the inhabitants of Asia visited Ephesus 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 theater, or worship a goddess. And while they were in Ephesus, they heard of this Christian lecturer, who was both speaking and answering questions for five hours in the middle of every day.<sup>5</sup>

It must have been thrilling to see Paul lecturing in this setting, engaging people of all backgrounds, inviting their questions and answering them thoughtfully with compelling brilliance. If you're disappointed that Luke's account so brief, Paul's letter to the Romans is a classic example of his powerful dialogical reasoning.

The hall was more than just a stage for debating inquirers. From what we know of Paul's methods and can infer from his letters, it became a center for equipping disciples for ministry and mission. It is likely that his co-laborers Epaphras, Aristarchus, Tychicus and Trophimus came to faith and became disciples in this school, as did Erastus (19:22) and Gaius (19:29). Many of those who were converted in Ephesus went back to their home towns and became effective witnesses for the gospel. As Stott suggests,

Thus the gospel must have spread to the Lycus Valley and its chief towns Colosse, Laodicea and Hierapolis, which Epaphras had visited but Paul had not, and perhaps to the remaining five of the seven churches of Revelation 2 and 3, namely Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis and Philadelphia.<sup>6</sup>

In retrospect we can see the Spirit's strategy in forbidding Paul and his companions to preach the word in Asia on their second missionary journey. Since Ephesus was the most strategic city in Asia, the Spirit's refusal must have been confused and bewildered them. But the Spirit instead opened a door to plant churches in Macedonia. A map of Paul's third journey reveals that these churches, along with those in South Galatia, were "strategic points on the circumference of the circle of which Ephesus was the center."<sup>7</sup> Paul's wanderings at first appeared aimless and fruitless to the naked eye, but the Spirit's initial prohibition did not diminish Paul's strategy. Rather, it expanded it to such a degree "that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks" (v. 10).

Paul had suffered the loss of all things as a result of his conversion to Christ (Phil 3:8). Many scholars think that was married prior to his conversion and that his wife either died or left him as a result of his conversion. In any case, Paul never experienced the joy of having children of his own, and yet consider how his face became "radiant" and his "heart throbbed and swelled with joy as the gospel he preached countless "sons" and "daughters."

### B. An extraordinary outpouring of life (19:11–12)

**And God was doing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, 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. (19:11–12)**

In Ephesus "God was doing 'extraordinary miracles' (lit. "miracles not experienced") by the hands of Paul." Paul's miracles in Ephesus exceeded anything he had done before, giving new meaning to the Semitic idiom "through his hands," for the miracles occurred without his knowledge or his touch. It seems people were so desperate for healing and deliverance from evil spirits, they raided Paul's workshop while he was teaching and took the cloths that he used to wipe the sweat off his face and the leather apron that held his tools, and carried them away to the sick. In our day no doctor in his right mind would permit either of these into his operating room. But in a city that was renowned in antiquity as a center for practitioners of magic and superstitions, it shouldn't surprise us that they believed divine life could be mediated through clothing that Paul wore during his working hours. What is surprising is that it worked!

What is the significance of these miracles? Throughout the book of Acts we've seen how the Holy Spirit anointed the apostles with power to heal the sick and drive out demons in almost identical fashion as Jesus. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, with *signs* and *wonders* and *miracles*" (2 Cor 12:12). The term "miracle" is the Greek term *dunamis*, which is better translated "a mighty act of power." In the Old Testament it is used of God's supernatural power in creating the universe, and often has strong military overtones as God overcomes his enemies to establish his kingdom on earth. "Wonder" is the response of awe and utter amazement the mighty act of power provokes. Jesus' mighty acts could not be ignored or go unnoticed. They were inescapable. "Sign" indicates that the "wondrous act" pointed to a greater spiritual reality. In the New Testament the word "wonder" is never used apart from the word "sign." God is not a genie or an aimless wonder worker, but a careful teacher who uses the physical world to lead his people into deeper spiritual truths. While signs are selective and temporary, the spiritual realities are permanent and available to all.

Paul is shown to be the mediator of God's power greater than anything Ephesus can offer. For Luke's audience the miracles through sweat-cloths and work-aprons recall how the hemorrhaging woman was made clean by touching the fringe of Jesus' prayer shawl without his knowledge. Perhaps even more significantly, in Acts 5:15 the sick were carried out into the streets and "laid on cots so that as Peter came by, at least his shadow might fall on some of them" (5:15) so that they too were healed without his knowledge nor his touch. "Peter's shadow would recall God's power overshadowing Mary (Luke 1:35) and the cloud of heavenly glory from which the Father claimed Jesus at the transfiguration (9:34)."<sup>8</sup>

The prophets wrote that in the Messianic age holiness would be intensified to such a degree that even "the bells of the horses" and "every pot in Jerusalem and Judah shall be holy to the LORD" (Zech 14:20–21). In other words there will be no distinction between the holy and unholy. The whole world and everything in it will be holy, as we sing in that glorious hymn,

*Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God almighty  
All thy works shall praise thy Name  
In earth and sky and sea*

In summary, we discover that Paul's rejection in the synagogue led to an open door of greater opportunity to preach the word, which was confirmed by unprecedented outpouring of life through healing and deliverance.

## II. The Failure of Infiltration by Imitation (19:13–19)

### A. Counterfeit wonder workers (19:13–16)

**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." Seven sons of a Jewish high priest named Sceva were doing this. But the evil spirit answered them, "Jesus I know, and Paul I recognize, but who are you?" 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. (19:13–16)**

Tate, our three-year old grandson, doesn't want to be left out of any activity going on inside or outside our home. If he sees you doing something in the kitchen, he drops what he is doing, runs up to you and with a bit of tenacious force says, "I can do it, please!" He then leaps into action before you can give any instructions. I can tell you the results are not always optimal. In the same way some itinerant Jewish exorcists in Ephesus, observing the exceptional power unleashed in the name of Jesus, don't want to be left out of the action and jump into the fray without hesitation. The verb "undertook" (*ἐπιχειρῶ* — "set one's hand

to”) shows these itinerant priests taking the name of Jesus into their hands, hoping to magically manipulate its power for their own ends. But, like my grandson, they haven’t read the directions, so they simply invoke “the Jesus that Paul preaches.”

While we are waiting in suspense to see what happens, Luke presses the pause button on the action to highlight their impressive credentials. Luke identifies them as “seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest.” At first glance they come on stage as “the brightest and best” the world has to offer (like a surgical team trained at Stanford). F. F. Bruce notes that “Jewish high priests were believed to know the correct pronunciation of the name of the God of Israel, and therefore (by the standards of the magic art) to have access to a source of exceptional power.”<sup>9</sup> It is possible that the seven sons “did belong to one of the priestly families of Jerusalem (even the best families have their deviants), though undoubtedly the title ‘Jewish chief priest’ was a self-designation manufactured to impress their clients.”<sup>10</sup> These were wandering, self-glorifying snake oil salesmen who conformed to Ephesus’s obsession with magic rather than remaining true to the Lord.

When the seven try their hand with the new name, which to them was merely a magic word, the demon responds to their horror, “Jesus I know, and Paul I recognize (*ἐπίσταμαι*), but who are you?” The disastrous consequences are almost humorous in the telling. The man goes berserk, leaps upon the exorcists, beats them to a pulp and tears their clothes off. Instead of casting out the demon, they are cast out of the house and run out into the streets naked and bloody. Like children playing with a grenade that explodes in their hands, “they were taught a lesson about the danger of using the name of Jesus in their dabbling in the supernatural.”<sup>11</sup>

These are the consequences of confronting evil without the Holy Spirit. If you fight the world with the world’s weapons, the world will destroy you.

### B. Jesus is glorified and his people purified (19:17–19)

**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. Also many of those who were now believers came, confessing and divulging their practices. 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. (19:17–19)**

The news spread quickly in this densely populated urban environment, and all who heard were filled with fear and reverential awe, knowing that the name of Jesus that Paul proclaimed and brought such an outpouring of life was not to be trifled with. Not only was the name of Jesus glorified, but also his people were purified. As sometimes is the case, those who placed their faith in Jesus had not fully repented of their pagan practices and required further conviction. The public and graphic humiliation of the exorcists prompted many who were already believers to repent by publicly confessing hidden practices. As Bruce observes, “According to magical theory, the potency of a spell is bound up with its secrecy; if it be divulged, it become ineffective. So these converted magicians renounced their imagined power by rendering their spells inoperative.”<sup>12</sup> Similarly when we confess our hidden sins and expose them to the light, they lose their power over us.

A significant number of these new believers, instead of realizing the riches they could gain by selling their magical scrolls, brought them before the congregation and openly renounced their contents by burning them. The scrolls were valued at fifty thousand silver pieces. Given that one piece of silver (*argyriion*) was worth a day’s wage, the income derived from selling the scrolls would have equaled what an average worker could earn in 137 years. In the kingdom, holiness takes precedence over profit. God doesn’t want money that is earned at the expense of people’s

well being. I spoke with someone recently who removed his money from one his mutual funds when he discovered they were investing in e-cigarettes that sell flavors that have great appeal to minors.

### C. The inescapable conclusion (19:20)

“So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily”. (19:20) The verse can also be translated, “In this manner, in accordance to the Lord’s power the word was growing and prevailing.” Which ever you prefer, the word of the Lord wins all power encounters. Keener sums up the enduring impact God’s word had in Ephesus and beyond.

Paul’s years of suffering and patient endurance were now bearing fruit; the barriers to the Gentiles had broken down, and Paul was seeing his greatest successes yet...it was the Lord’s message that spread, and it would continue to spread after Paul’s departure. Strong evidence for a flourishing church in the province by the end of the first century (continuing in subsequent centuries) provides eloquent testimony to this growth.<sup>13</sup>

### III. Reflection: When the Spirit Pours Out Life

Looking back over the text I’m deeply struck by two things. First, how focused and faithful Paul was to his calling to tirelessly preach and teach God’s word, five hours a day for two years. The gospel will never penetrate a community or culture with shallow teaching or emotional appeals. Paul engaged his hearers with carefully reasoned and persuasive arguments. As Stott argues,

Because he believed the gospel to be true, he was not afraid to engage the minds of his hearers. He did not simply proclaim his message in a “take it or leave it” fashion; instead, he marshalled arguments to support and demonstrate his case...Arguments of course are no substitutes for the work of the Holy Spirit. But then trust in the Holy Spirit is no substitute for arguments either.<sup>14</sup>

It takes time and careful thought to explain God’s story of redemption in all its grandeur, as Jesus did with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. As he brought the powerful poetic images of the prophets together with the gospel story, their eyes were opened and they said to one another, “Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?” (Luke 24:32).

The second thing that strikes me is that for the remainder of the text Paul is absent. The Spirit authenticates his message through extraordinary miracles without his knowledge, nor his presence. It is not Paul who exposes the spiritual imposters, it is a demon that goes berserk and casts them out of the house naked and wounded, exalting the name of Jesus. Finally, it is not Paul who convicts former magicians that their initial repentance was not sufficient. It was the Holy Spirit within them that gently led them to repentance as they witnessed God’s judgment on the seven sons of Sceva.

All of this suggests to me that we can live focused lives, saturating ourselves in God’s word day and night and leave the results the Spirit. We need not be anxious or fret about our influence. Over time the Spirit will authenticate our lives with the reality of holiness. We need not be overly concerned about imposters, for evil always has a way of overstepping its bounds and exposing itself for what it is. Finally, we must never beat people into repentance, that’s the Spirit’s job and he is far better at it than we are.

In closing I’ve asked Camille Dabaghian to share with you how the Spirit has been working in her life:

A little over 12 weeks ago God transformed my life and I am really excited to stand here today to tell you how.

Depression has plagued most of my life, keeping me under silent submission to anxiety, fear, confusion, apathy, and emotional turmoil. I found everything equally overwhelming, whether a criticism or an



encouragement, it all seemed too hard or too much to bear. For years I worked very hard at my inner life, trying to change myself into who I thought God wanted me to be. Still I could not pull myself out of this inevitable cycle.

Out of sheer desperation for my family I decided to go to counseling. On February 12th, I attended my first counseling session. In 6 sessions I was not given one piece of counsel. Ironically, this was the provision of God. Every week I shared part of my story. I poured out my pain, suffering, guilt and shame, and every time God would heal it the moment it left my mouth. This miracle was just the beginning.

One day, out of my own mouth the Spirit of God defined repentance for me. As soon as it left my lips I knew I had never fully repented. This is what the Lord said, “Repentance isn’t about being sorry. Saying you’re sorry is saying, ‘I am sorry for who I am.’ Repentance is saying, ‘I relinquish my identity to you, Lord, to be transformed by *your* will.’” So I did that and God delivered me.

No more fear. No more confusion. No more depression. No more anxiety. No more shame. God has poured out His Spirit on me through His Word, and I have been meditating on it day and night for the last 12 weeks. The richness I feel everyday is a stark contrast to the emptiness I felt before. He has filled my days with so much life and meaning and peace that I just want to sit with him all the time. I cannot help but share this good news, it has overflowed on everyone I have talked to, because for the first time in my life I have tasted that the Lord is good. Jesus said He is the bread of life, and I am here today to tell you that it’s true. It’s all true. Here are some of the ways He delivered me:

He delivered me from my suffering. One night, about 5 years ago, as I was reflecting on the story of the dead girl and the bleeding woman, I told my husband that I was the dead girl, but I longed to be the bleeding woman. We looked at each other stunned at the revelation that the Holy Spirit spoke through me, but in my heart I was terrified of becoming that desperate. As Jesus called the 12 year old girl saying, “Little girl, I say to you, get up!” God revealed to me that He had raised me up when I was 12, when I realized that my dad couldn’t love me the way I needed. As God had freed the woman who had been bleeding for 12 years, he revealed to me that 12 years ago he delivered to me, my husband, who has faithfully nurtured my heart of stone so Jesus could give me a heart of flesh. In Mark 5:28–29 it says, “because she thought, ‘If I just touch His clothes, I will be healed.’ Immediately her bleeding stopped and she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering.” My faithful touch was not of His clothes, but was an acknowledgment of my desperate need for him. As Jesus said to the women, he has said to me “Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering.” I am now free from my suffering.

He anointed me. By profession I do makeup and hair. I started about the time that Joe and I started dating, 12 years ago. I had always wanted to be an artist, but I was too afraid to create anything until I started doing makeup. Joe encouraged me to keep pushing myself, but makeup quickly became part of my identity. God revealed to me in John 9:1–9 that as he took the mud and anointed the eyes of the blind man, he had anointed *my* hands that were used to build *my* kingdom in ignorance. He has now made them holy. I am now an anointed daughter of the King.

He delivered me from my fantasies. I have always fantasized about my life. I grew up very lonely and afraid; to escape life I would fantasize. Satan even tormented me with pornography periodically

over the years. This kept me in guilt and shame, and kept me away from *this* very word. 2 Corinthians 10:4–6 says, “For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments, casting down imaginations, and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ, being ready to punish every disobedience, when your obedience is complete.” I am now free from my fantasies.

I believed in Jesus, in His death and resurrection. I had been baptized and had been filled with the Holy Spirit, but God revealed to me that I had not entered His rest, as Paul speaks about in Hebrews 4. In my disobedience I kept myself apart from God because I was afraid. I was afraid of being disappointed. I was afraid of what He might ask of me. I was afraid of myself. So I held onto my pain, and I let it become my identity.

In Hebrews 9 Paul talks about the tabernacle, the Holy place, where priests go regularly to preform their ritual duties, but into the inner sanctuary, behind the curtain, was the Most Holy place. Only the High Priest would go once a year. He goes with a sacrifice to atone for his sins and the unintentional sins of the people. When our perfect Jesus, the Highest Priest, died he washed our sins away by His blood. God revealed to me that because of my disobedience I had only entered the Holy Place — the first section. Hebrews 9:8 says, “By this the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the holy places is not yet opened as long as the first section is still standing.” When I repented God unveiled my eyes and showed me the truth, that by His sacrifice I have now entered the Most Holy place, with him and by him. I entered that most Holy Place, and *he* gave me rest.

I stand before you today a holy dwelling place in Christ Jesus, reconciled to one new body, redeemed and anointed by God. My God has delighted in me and has richly blessed my life with His Holy peace. He is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer.

As Paul wrote the Ephesians, “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Eph 2:8). Amen.

1. Craig S. Keener, 15:1–23:35, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary* 3 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 2826.
2. Keener, *Acts*, 3:2828.
3. F.F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 388–89.
4. John Stott, *The Message of Acts*, BST (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1990), 314.
5. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 314.
6. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 314.
7. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, 328.
8. Craig S. Keener, 3:1–14:28, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary* 2; (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 1202.
9. [https://accordance.bible/link/read/FFB—Acts\\_Commentary#1014](https://accordance.bible/link/read/FFB—Acts_Commentary#1014)
10. Richard N. Longenecker, *Acts*, EBC 9; ed. Frank E. Gaebel and J. D. Douglas; Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), paragraph 52216.
11. Longenecker, *Acts*, paragraph 52217.
12. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, 391.
13. Keener, *Acts*, 3:2860.
14. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 312–13.

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