

Burning Bridges . . . Killing Spiders

Acts 19:8-20

Introduction

Charles Haddon Spurgeon once remarked, “The Bible is like a lion; you don’t defend it, you just let it loose.”

In Acts, chapter 19, we discover a scene in which the word of God is simply let loose. The transformation in the lives of people is incredible; the assault upon the kingdom of darkness is undeniable.

Ephesus was a city given over to the occult; totally mesmerized by magical spells and charms. It was a city where superstition and the dark arts found a home. It would be the place where the power of God’s kingdom would invade and disarm the power of Satan.

One author called Ephesus, “The Dark Castle of Asia Minor”.

Determination of Truth Against Darkness

Let us rejoin the invasion of this Dark Castle and the ongoing adventure of a warrior named Paul. We ended our previous discussion with verse 8 in Acts, chapter 19.

Three key aspects of Paul’s ministry

Verses 8 through 12 give us three key aspects of Paul’s ministry at Ephesus. Let me give them to you.

Teaching the word of God

1. Verses 8 through 10 give us the first aspect of Paul’s teaching – teaching the word of God.

Look at verse 8.

And he entered the synagogue and continued speaking out boldly for three months, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God.

You may remember from Ephesians, chapter 6, that the armor worn by the believer to engage in spiritual battle is armor that includes one offensive weapon; the only offensive weapon, as we are told in verse 17b,

. . . the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

In Hebrews, chapter 4, verse 12a, we are told that,

. . . the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword . . .

In Revelation, chapter 2, verse 16, the sword is the mouth of the sovereign Lord who comes to judge His enemies.

Paul assaults the Dark Castle by swinging the sword, which is the revelation of God.

The teaching by Paul is:

- Continuous.

The imperfect tense is used in verse 8 to refer to Paul teaching in an ongoing fashion. At every opportunity in the synagogue, he teaches, showing, as he has done in the past, that the One prophesied in the Hebrew scriptures is indeed Jesus Christ.

- Courageous.

Verse 8 also tells us that Paul taught boldly. The hallmark of Paul’s preaching was that it was uncompromisingly confrontational; he held back nothing out of fear of rejection or hostility. Whether his nation believed him or not, he told them the truth. As long as he had an open ear, Paul taught.

Now notice 9.

But when some were becoming hardened and disobedient, speaking evil of the Way before the people, he withdrew from them and took away the disciples . . .

The word in this verse translated “hardened” is “skleruno” (σκληρυνω) in the Greek, which is used in the New Testament to refer to the heart that is hardened against God.

Hebrews, chapter 3, verse 15, warns the person who hears the gospel,

. . . Today if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts . . .

In chapter 4, verse 7, the warning is repeated,

Today if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts.

When the truth of the gospel is heard and repeatedly rejected, the heart becomes hardened and the gospel message becomes like an arrow shot against a stone wall.

A letter was written to the editor of a daily newspaper. I thought it was a perfect illustration of a man who had hardened his heart to the gospel. He wrote,

After hearing an evangelist preach on the radio, viewing him on television, and reading reports and letters concerning his mission, I am heartily sick of the type of religion that insists my soul and everyone else’s needs saving. I have never felt that I was lost, nor do I feel that I daily wallow in the mire of sin, although repetitive preaching insists that I do. Give me a practical religion that teaches gentleness and tolerance, that acknowledges no barrier of creed, that teaches children of goodness instead of sin. If in order to save my soul I must accept such a philosophy as I have recently heard preached, I prefer to remain damned forever.

So Paul packs up his books and lesson outlines and leaves the synagogue. Verse 9b tells us that he moves into the school or hall of Tyrannus. Notice that verse.

. . . reasoning daily in the school of Tyrannus.

We do not know anything about this man Tyrannus, other than he was a teacher known by his nickname, Tyrannus. Evidently the nickname was given to him by his students. Translated, it simply

means, “The Tyrant”. Perhaps you have had a teacher like him!!

The western text adds that Paul taught daily from the fifth hour to the tenth; that is, from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. This was when the people of Ephesus took their midday break. Their workday began at 7 a.m. and broke at 11 a.m., and then, continued from 4 p.m. until around 9:30 p.m. So Paul uses this open time as an opportunity to lecture and teach.

Notice verse 10.

This took place for two years, so that all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.

Imagine, five hours a day, six days a week, fifty-two weeks a year for two years! That is over 3,000 hours of teaching. He saturated the disciples with truth.

Use your imagination with me. If you never missed a Sunday sermon, and I preached for thirty minute sermons, you would only hear the word taught twenty-six hours in a year’s time. That is thirty minutes times fifty-two Sundays. In other words, to sit under the ministry of the word for 3,000 hours as the Ephesians did, would take you more than one hundred years. It would take you one hundred fifteen years to get what the Ephesians needed in order to stand fast against the wiles of the Devil.

We have a problem, don’t we? The solution is to be in the word much more than you are in church, right?

If you think you are getting enough from my thirty minutes a Sunday, by comparison, you get less in one entire year than the Ephesians got in just one week. So the solution is two-fold: drive across town to church and open your Bible, and walk across your living room and open your Bible. Publicly get under the word, and privately get into the word.

So for two years, Paul keeps up an incredibly grueling schedule, as he invades the territory of the magicians, sorcerers, and occultists by means of the word of God.

Miraculous healing

2. Now verses 11 through 12a give us the second part of Paul’s ministry – the aspect of miraculous healing.

Look at verse 11 of Acts, chapter 19.

God was performing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul,

This is direct healing by Paul's touch. Continue to verse 12a.

so that handkerchiefs or aprons were even carried from his body to the sick, and the diseases left them . . .

This is indirect healing.

If you do not understand this ministry and power of healing, both by the hand of Paul and by virtue of contact with his clothing, as a part of Paul's apostolic authority, you are more likely to be swayed by the televangelist who tries to sell you a handkerchief that has been dipped in the Jordan river – and for a gift of twenty-five dollars, its healing power can be yours.

A church member gave me a letter a few weeks ago. In this letter, a guy claims that if I write for a cross that his ministry has blessed, I will be healthy, wealthy, and powerful. It is a little cross that says, "faith" and "grace" on it. The letter continued with the claim, "In a few days, you will be receiving your beautiful prosperity guiding cross. It's called a health, prosperity, and happiness cross – it can help you have the life you dream of."

One testimonial says, "I was sick and was healed."

Another said, "I was in need of 2,492 dollars for income tax. God blessed me the next day [with it]."

Now that is a little tempting!

What does the Bible say? The scriptures clearly declared that this ministry of healing and signs and wonders was intended by God during this foundational era to accomplish at least two things:

- First, to give the confirmation of the messenger as being from God (Romans 15).

They did not have this Bible to test the messengers by. If someone said they were from God, how would they know whether it was true? So God empowered the apostolic community with signs and wonders to confirm the messenger.

- Secondly, to provide the authentication of the message as originating from God.

Look at Hebrews, chapter 2, verses 1 through 3.

For this reason we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it. For if the word spoken through angels proved unalterable, and every transgression and disobedience received a just penalty, how will we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard,

Who were those who literally heard the Lord teach? The apostolic community. Continue to verse 4.

God also testifying with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will.

The signs and wonders and miracles were intended by God to bear witness to the watching world that the apostles were indeed from God, for only God had the power to heal and resurrect from the dead.

What you need to catch is that Paul's healing ability perfectly mirrored the healing ability of Jesus Christ, who, by the way, according to Acts, chapter 2, verse 22, was also authenticated by signs and wonders and miracles.

Do you remember how Jesus Christ healed? He healed with His hands, but that is not all. Do you remember the woman who had internal hemorrhaging or an "issue of blood"? She came up behind Jesus and touched the edge of His clothing and was immediately healed.

What is Paul doing? He is healing people by the touch of his hands and by the touch of his clothing!

The validation of Paul's ministry was his miracles. The validation of a man's ministry today, according to completed scripture, is his adherence to biblical doctrine (I John 4).

Exorcism

3. Look at verse 12b of Acts, chapter 19, and notice the third element of Paul's ministry – that of exorcism.

. . . and the evil spirits went out.

Luke carefully delineates that healing and exorcism were separate issues. By the touch of Paul's clothing, the sick were healed, and any demonized person was freed.

The modern day signs and wonders movement combines the two and claims that demons are causing the sickness. So these miracle workers of today are casting out the demon of cancer, the demon of arthritis, and the demon of club feet. That is not what this text records for the careful Bible student.

Ladies and gentlemen, sickness is the indiscriminate result of the fall of man – and every one of us will get sick. Eventually, unless we have an accident, every one of us will get sick enough that we die, right?

By the way, exorcism is also another aspect of apostolic authority. Let me repeat that in another way – claiming authority over the demonic world was a part of the apostolic ministry, a ministry that mirrored the power of Christ in commanding demons.

There is not one verse in the epistles that gives the believer a model, formula, or command to directly order demons to do anything. We are to:

- “resist the devil” (“anthistemi” in the Greek, meaning “to take a stand against”), “and he will flee from you” (James 4:7);
- “stand firm against the schemes of the devil” (Ephesians 6:11);

There is an incredible amount of confusion, as I said in our last discussion, simply because the Bible does not offer a model for exorcism; simply because it was the apostolic community that laid the foundation of the church that had this particular ministry.

There is an exploding industry under the categorical phrase, “Spiritual Warfare,” with seminars that teach everything from “binding demons” to “prayer walking”. The church is becoming as superstitious as the unbelieving world.

The Discernment of Truth by the Demon

Notice how Luke provides the following illustration of superstitious men, in verses 13 and 14 of Acts, chapter 19.

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.” Seven sons of one Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, were doing this.

Mankind has always believed in the spirit world and they have attempted to exercise some form of control over it for their own benefit. This may be through the witchdoctor and his fire, or the soothsayer and his potions.

Perhaps you saw the opening ceremony of the 1998 Winter Olympics. You saw the huge summo wrestlers engage in the religious exercise of ridding the games of any evil spirits. They did their strange looking poses and slapped their hands together, supposedly to cleanse the games.

Satan has always delighted in any form of attention given to him and his kingdom. It proves his existence and distracts mankind from the worship of his Conqueror.

So, in Ephesus, there were traveling exorcists who exercised control over superstitious people by their formulas and incantations.

One author writes,

First century 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.

Notice verses 15 and 16.

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.

Instead of them getting rid of the demon, the demon got rid of them! In sudden fury, the possessed man leaps upon these exorcists and overpowers them.

Two lessons

We can learn two lessons from this. Let me give them to you.

The name of the Lord Jesus is not some magical incantation to be used against the demonic world

1. First, the name of the Lord Jesus is not some magical incantation to be used against the demonic world.

The name of Jesus is not some magical charm; some formula for power. If it were, these men would have been successful. It is what the name represents, and it is important who you are when you mention His name.

The enemy of the Lord Jesus knows who is truly a follower of Christ and who is only acting

2. Secondly, the enemy of the Lord Jesus knows who is truly a follower of Christ and who is only acting the part.

These men fled out of the house. They were beaten and their clothing was ripped off, as was their spiritual façade. All the while, the demonized man was screaming, “Who do you think you are?”

The Development of Truth in the Disciples

Look at verses 17 and 18.

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. Many also of those who had believed [in the past] kept coming [in the present], confessing and disclosing their practices.

This is the development of the truth in the life of the disciples. There are some internal results in these verses. The Ephesian believers were:

- admitting,
- confessing,
- disclosing their practices.

The word “practices” in the Greek is “praxis,” which literally referred to secret magic words or spells which were considered useless if they were divulged. These Ephesian believers were turning from their magic like the Thessalonians turned from idols.

Now notice verse 19.

And many of those [believers] 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.

So they were admitting, confessing, disclosing, and now:

- forsaking their practices.

They literally burned their bridges behind them. They allowed no opportunity for a change of mind. They got rid of that stuff – permanently.

In total, it was worth 50,000 drachmas, or pieces of silver. Ladies and gentlemen, this bonfire burned, in today’s economy, approximately nine million dollars worth of sinful junk.

Application

Let me close with a couple of applications.

Two exposures were observed

This passage today, has exposed two kinds of people.

Unbelievers masquerading as if empowered by the Savior

1. First, unbelievers masquerading as if empowered by the Savior.

The seven sons of Sceva were imposters who were out to sucker troubled people and make a fast shekel.

Believers compromising by involvement with the sinful

2. Secondly, this passage exposed believers compromising by involvement with the sinful.

These believers had come to faith in Christ, but they still had some secret sins with which they needed to deal.

This is the process of sanctification; this is the demonstration of all things becoming new and old things passing away. These new believers ended their compromise with Ephesian magic and superstition.

This reminds me of the man went forward to kneel and pray every Sunday after the sermon. Every Sunday he loudly prayed the same prayer, “Lord, take the cobwebs of sin out of my life.”

Sunday after Sunday he did this, until one Sunday, the pastor knelt beside the man, and when he once again prayed, “Lord, take the cobwebs of sin out of my life,” the pastor prayed aloud, “Yes, Lord, and kill that spider!”

If there is no spider, there will be no cobwebs! Ask yourself, “What spiders have I allowed to roam in my heart and mind; in my life?”

Now notice verse 20.

So the word of the Lord was growing mightily and prevailing.

This verse contains the external fruit. There is:

- First, the internal fruit as we saw the living Word magnified, in verse 17;
- Now, the external fruit, as we see the spoken Word multiplied, in verse 20, as these young believers take new steps of commitment.

Two questions should be asked

There are two questions that should be asked.

What would be disclosed if the demonic world could identify us as a believer or an imposter?

1. What would be disclosed if the demonic world could identify each one of us as a believer or an imposter?

Who among us would run away exposed as spiritually naked and destitute – having played the part; having acted a lie; having, in reality, lived a double life?

What would be forsaken if the Spirit's conviction swept through us?

2. What would be forsaken or burned today, if the Spirit's conviction swept through us?

What would you put in the fire? Would you put in:

- ungodly romance novels;
- videos;
- pornographic magazines;
- drugs;

- alcoholic beverages;
- horoscopes;
- psychic telephone numbers;
- the television?

Anything that draws you away from holiness, purity, and godliness, and diminishes your testimony of integrity and your hunger for righteousness; anything that entices and tempts you and silences you should be burned!

I find it fascinating that in this part of Asia, the word of God grew and multiplied and prevailed only after the church was purified. This was a revival of believers who cleaned out their closets; who got rid of their secrets.

When the Christian confessed sin committed behind a closed door, the word of God was given a greater open door. Purity in private produced opportunity in public.

Kill the spider, and the tangled cobwebs of sin will cease to enslave you. Burn your bridges behind you and the bonfire may be painful and costly, but it will be life-changing. And the word of God through you, will be magnified and multiplied and glorified.

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