

We are continuing our series in Acts: To the Ends of the Earth, and we will pick up right where we left off last week. Last week we found Paul in the city of Ephesus. If you remember, we focused on a particular passage that will become the launching pad for today's message. Verse 10 says, "This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks." This verse connects the events of the previous account with the passage that we are looking at today.

So, to refresh our memories and lay the groundwork for today's message, I want to briefly talk about what continued. Verse 10 says, "This continued," about Paul's ministry. What do we know of Paul's ministry in Ephesus? First, we see that he was there for three years. It was from Ephesus that most of the churches we read about in Revelation were planted. It's where Paul penned his letter to the Corinthian church, and it's where Timothy would go on to pastor and receive the two pastoral epistles addressed to him in the NT. It's where the Apostle John would pastor and write his three epistles. Ephesus would become the location of a very fruitful church in the ministry of Paul and the early church.

Secondly, and apart from the obvious work of the Spirit, what made this possible was Paul's dogged determination to proclaim the gospel. Day in and day out, Paul would rise before dawn, make tents until 11, preach in the Hall of Tyrannus until 4, and then finish his day in the homes of the disciples, further instructing them. He relentlessly kept up at this pace six out of the seven days a week. As a result, God blessed Paul's efforts "so that all of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks."

How incredible would it be if that same statement could be made of the Lehigh Valley because the church was committed to that goal?

Before we look more closely at this passage, I want to help provide further background information on the city of Ephesus. So, we can understand the environment in which Paul was ministering. Next week we will look even more closely at Ephesus to see how it parallels our modern context. What's important for us to know is that "Ephesus was a city hospitable to magicians, sorcerers, and charlatans of all sorts." At one point in their history, a meteor fell from the sky, and they worshipped it for its 'magical' powers. Additionally, it was home to one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, the temple of Artemis, the goddess of fertility. But, for now, it's enough for us to know that Ephesus was a city fascinated with the supernatural and stepped in the occult.

As we discussed last week, following his typical pattern when Paul arrived in Ephesus, he immediately went to the Synagogue. We are told that he argued persuasively for three months before they had enough and kicked him out. This interaction didn't deter Paul. He rented out a local 'lecture' hall, known as the Hall of Tyrannus, and taught there daily for two years straight. Paul was unyielding in his desire to spread the gospel.

So, to be the kind of church that can see the gospel spread to every person in the Lehigh Valley, we need to follow Paul's example, have clear expectations, and trust God to deliver the

goods. Seeing how God moves through the faithful hard work of his people is exactly what happens in this account. Let's also consider that much of what is happening in this account recorded by Luke happened unbeknownst to Paul. With that out of the way, let's jump into the following verses starting with verse 11.

"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."

We could probably spend our entire time together focused on these two verses. Notice the attention to detail. Luke makes it clear that God was doing the miracles by the hands of Paul. How incredible would it be to be a useful and trusted instrument in the hands of God? M'Cheyne says, "It is not great talents God blesses so much as likeness to Jesus. A holy minister is an awful weapon in the hands of God."

Additionally, Luke calls them extraordinary miracles, and this detail should get our attention. After all, aren't all miracles extraordinary? We must consider the nature of these miracles set against the backdrop of where Paul was ministering. These actions weren't magical; they were miraculous. Some liberal scholars struggled to believe this passage because it seems so far-fetched that they've reduced it to legend. However, given the context, Paul was doing ministry. It should not surprise us that his hard work in spreading the gospel was strengthened by God's miraculous power to affirm the legitimacy of the mission.

What made these miracles extraordinary was that they were accomplished by people borrowing Paul's handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched his skin. It's obvious that it pleased God to accomplish these miracles in this way. These miracles must've been incredible to witness in an area filled with fake, fraudulent, and false magic. Seeing something like this would've been quite extraordinary, even compared to other miracles at that time. There are two important details we can gather from these miracles.

First, the miracles that God performed by the hands of Paul are placed on par with the miracles of Jesus and Peter. Remember when a woman touched the hem of Jesus' garment and was healed (Luke 8)? And remember Peter's shadow, which healed people when it passed over them (Acts 5)? These miracles are not normative but used by God to establish the gospel in this dark area.

Secondly, let's consider and take a closer look at the objects God used to perform these miracles. Paul's handkerchief and apron. Upon closer study, these handkerchiefs are Paul's sweat rags and the belt he wore when making tents. The clothes Paul used while tent-making to provide for himself to minister, his work clothes, were the objects God used to accomplish these extraordinary miracles. Consider what that must've meant to Paul. It was as if God was saying, "I see how hard you've been working." Paul didn't work to provide for himself to live the life he wanted. Instead, he worked to provide for himself to further the kingdom. As a result, God blessed Paul's efforts.

Consider how different this is from us today. As believers living in the Lehigh Valley, we can relate to Paul in being busy. However, our busy schedules are mostly self-serving. If we're lucky, we can squeeze some time in for God, and I'm not talking about church attendance. This was not the pattern for Paul. He was busy making the most of every opportunity to further the spread of the gospel, which in turn resulted in all of Asia hearing. What an incredible accomplishment. If we want to see all the Lehigh Valley come to hear the gospel, it will require the people of God to live on mission for the glory of God.

In contrast to the work of Paul, we read in the following verses, "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[a] of them and overpowered them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded."

These men were scam artists. There is no recorded name of Sceva found in Jewish history as a "High Priest." It would seem these men were pretending to be something they were not for a means of financial gain. Exorcism was a very lucrative business; as you can imagine, business was booming in this area. Much of the magic performed in Ephesus was just that; it was a performance, and it wasn't real, but when these men encountered an actual demon, it didn't go well for them.

The prevailing thought in that day was that for exorcists to cast out demons, they needed to adjure to a higher power and a name greater than their own. There was no greater power than the name of Jesus, the one Paul came to preach about. In appealing to the name of Jesus, these men had no idea what they were doing. They were about to be an example in front of the entire city. The demon responds to these men and says, "Jesus I know, and Paul I recognize, but who are you?"

You see, these men weren't claiming faith in Jesus. Instead, they were using the name of Jesus for their selfish gain, and as a result, the demon 'mastered' them. We might be tempted to laugh at what happened next, and I will admit it reads a bit funny but make no doubt it was terrifying to the entire region. The enemy beats these men, strips them naked before they run for their lives, and are exposed as frauds before the whole city.

We could learn a lot from this passage, and the application is found in the following verses.

"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."

We are observing the real vs. the fake, and we need to determine how we should respond—no more unconfessed idolatry. Perhaps we think that we are nothing like the Sons of Sceva, but is it possible that we are serving Jesus in addition to the idols in our lives? We invoke the name of Jesus when it's appropriate and, in so doing, take the name of Jesus lightly. It's clear from these verses that there were still many believers who confessed faith in Jesus but were holding onto their idols for backup. Like the sons of Sceva, many professing believers call upon Jesus without really knowing him. They are ready to call upon a Jesus who will be their spiritual good-luck charm, but they are not interested in knowing Jesus as the incarnate Son of God. They want a Jesus they can use, not a Jesus who saves.

Genuine believers can find themselves fooled by this thinking as well. We can lose sight of the biblical examples set by Paul and others and think that since we follow Jesus, our lives should be full of comfort. We develop a sense of entitlement that demands a particular way of life from Jesus. How often have you found yourself at this place?

When they saw what happened because of taking Jesus' name lightly, they came forward 'confessing and divulging their practices.' We are further told, "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." Commentators have debated how much the 50,000 pieces of silver are worth in today's estimates, but it's less about the value and more about the act of true repentance and departing from their former way of life completely.

I am convinced that if, like Ephesus, there was a temple located in the Lehigh Valley and at the center of the temple was an image of our local god, and we went in, we would see a statue of ourselves. So many of us are busy building a life for ourselves that we believe God owes us. We include God in the process, but we have never fully surrendered our lives to God. We worship him along with the other idols of our heart, and we are in danger of treating the name of Jesus like the 'Sons of Sceva.' Is there any way you're in danger of wanting a Jesus you can use rather than a Jesus who wants to be your savior? Let us respond in proper repentance confessing before others.

Luke closes this encounter with the statement, "So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily." All because God chose to work through one man's blood, sweat, and tears. What would it look like if we had an entire church fully committed to seeing everyone in the Lehigh Valley hear the word of the Lord? We'd see homes, workplaces, schools, and communities transformed, and we'd be certain to see the word of the Lord increase and prevail mightily. Who's in? Who would like to join together with a commitment to seeing everyone in the Lehigh Valley hear the gospel?