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MIRACLES AND MAGIC

SERIES: THE GREAT ADVENTURE

By Steve Zeisler

Ray Stedman used to quote this limerick:

“Our race had a splendid beginning,

But man spoiled his chances by sinning.

We hope that the story

Will end in God’s glory,

But at present the other side’s winning.”

It often seems to us that the power of God is no match for the troubles of the world. Considering the degradation of the culture and the violence that appears to be rising everywhere, it seems as if the other side is winning. Perhaps even more importantly, in our own lives there are times when we stop hoping God’s power can or will do anything for us personally, because the other side seems to be winning. We believe we’re going to heaven, but it’s hard to believe that anything good can come of our sorrows—hard family circumstances, depression, addictions, or whatever we are up against. God’s power doesn’t seem to be available or strong enough for him to act on our behalf.

I say all that because I want to end up affirming exactly the opposite in this message!

The light shines in the darkness

We’re going to look at a detailed account that takes place in the city of Ephesus, recorded in Acts 19. But the point in the end is simple: God’s power is absolute. Nothing that has discouraged us is ultimately going to prevail. We need to be reminded that there are reasons to be hopeful rather than discouraged. If we’ve quit or given up, we need not stay defeated.

One good reason to study the book of Acts is that the world of ancient Rome was similar to ours. It was an arrogant and degraded society. It had false religion, injustice, poverty, and disease—all problems we have in our world. Yet ordinary people with a clear message of a risen Savior began to advance on that world, and they saw it change. In the text we’re going to look at, we’ll see a city changed by the decision of our Lord and Savior to invest his power in making it change. When we read these stories, we can be encouraged that he can and will do the same for us.

John’s gospel declares: “In Him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” (John 1:4; NRSV.)

Before we read our text, let me give you some background. Ephesus was the capital of the Roman province of Asia Minor. It was a very important, large city. Paul had visited the synagogue there on a previous journey, and the Ephesians had invited him to come back and speak to them further about Christ. That was unusual, so he made note of it and said, "I will come back if it is God's will." About a year later he did. Acts 19:8: "Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God. But some of them became obstinate; they refused to believe and publicly maligned the Way [the name by which Christians referred to their movement in the earliest days]. So Paul left them. He took the disciples with him and had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus."

Now, these events have the power of God in them. We see God's power in the bold courage of the apostle, his clear expression of the truth about Jesus, his persuasiveness. Some who encountered the truth didn't believe it. They grew harder, more obstinate, more insistent in their rejection. Others believed it with all their heart, and they went daily to a school that Paul established to teach the things of God, so that they could grow in their faith and have something to share with other people. This is a great story of thoughtful missionary outreach, instruction, and discipling. It's coherently written in cause-and-effect terms: the preaching led to decisions, the decisions led to choices, and the choices had outcomes. Events unfolded in a reasonable way.

But starting in verse 11, the circumstances will change, and what will happen is surprising, without discernable sequence. This section isn't a story of persuasion and response. This is a series of "power encounters," as some have called them, in which God determines that now is the time for this city to be set free. It is a display of his power to tear down strongholds, to overturn darkness. God acts by fiat, in his own way, to accomplish his purposes.

He has not changed. Many of us are aware of well-entrenched falsehood, evil that has a strong place that seems indomitable. But God can tear it down. The first-century encounter in Ephesus bears witness to us that God can undo what is wrong in our lives, the lives of others, and indeed, the world.

Ray Stedman wrote about Ephesus at this time in history:

"The major problem in Ephesus was that it was a center for witchcraft. Superstition, demonism, and witchcraft held this city in its thrall. A weird mixture of black arts, worship of demons, astrology, occult practices of various kinds, and superstitious fears, had filled this city with priests, magicians, witches, warlocks, and quacks of every description." (1)

Evil strongholds exist in our time as well. That is what is behind the scenes when high school kids in Colorado don black trench coats and begin randomly killing their classmates, when parents sell their ten-year old children as sex objects to support a drug habit, when capable people with good options choose self-destructive, addictive behavior over and over again. Strongholds of dark things can grip hearts and places with terrible outcomes.

But the word of the apostle John remains true: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

Let's read Acts 19:11-20:

God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, so that even handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him were taken to the sick, and their illnesses were cured and the evil spirits left them.

Some Jews who went around driving out evil spirits tried to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who were demon-possessed. They would say, “In the name of Jesus, whom Paul preaches, I command you to come out.” Seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish high priest, were doing this. One day the evil spirit answered them, “Jesus I know, and I know about Paul, but who are you?” Then the man who had the evil spirit jumped on them and overpowered them all. He gave them such a beating that they ran out of the house naked and bleeding.

When this became known to the Jews and Greeks living in Ephesus, they were all seized with fear, and the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honor. Many of those who believed now came and openly confessed their evil deeds. A number who had practiced sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly. When they calculated the value of the scrolls, the total came to fifty thousand drachmas [pieces of silver]. In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power.

When God determines to act

Occult power was not only broken, it was ridiculed. Part of what makes the devil what he is is his arrogance. Part of what makes us afraid is that we give respect to things that are terrible. And part of the way out is to realize that evil is not all it's cracked up to be. There is ultimately something ridiculous about any who would stiffen their neck or raise their arm against the living God.

Consider the first couple of verses (11-12). You may have run into media preachers who promise to send you a prayer cloth that will cure your illnesses or take away your troubles, if only you send them money. They take that idea from these verses. But the “handkerchiefs” that touched Paul were really sweatbands. Paul made his living as a tentmaker, working with leather. It was hot, hard work, and he would use rags to wipe the sweat off his face, clean his tools, and so on. Someone would pick up these discarded, useless rags, and they would have healing power for some who received them. Televangelists and others promote Jesus trinkets of all kinds as power sources, but that's not at all what this text is talking about.

The point here is ultimately that God simply decided to act. It doesn't say that the Christians ever had any healing services or spiritual warfare conferences, that they gathered together to bring about change in the world, that they advanced on places where idols were worshiped, or that they deliberately confronted folks who believed in witchcraft. What it says is that the Lord God determined to do miracles. Luke calls them “extraordinary” miracles. Miracles are always amazing, but these were much more so. God determined to act in a way that would change everything in this region.

Observe what the believers in Ephesus were doing. They met together to study, worship, and learn in the hall of Tyrannus; and they told the truth about the Lord. Simple, basic Christianity. And God decided to do extraordinary miracles.

I believe the point of these cloths that accomplished healing and the banishing of demons is to show the complete subordination of wickedness. It can't stand when God determines it will fall. Paul didn't even need to show up or say a word of prayer or recite a scripture. Miracles could be accomplished with rags tossed on the floor by someone at work. That evil can be undone by something so unremarkable is God's way of underscoring his power. No ministry of miracle “prayer cloths” is suggested in this text.

Martin Luther's great hymn *A Mighty Fortress is Our God* says,

“The prince of darkness grim,

We tremble not for him—

His rage we can endure,

For lo, his doom is sure:

One little word shall fell him.”

One little word, or something less. A rag will do, if God so determines. So we don't have to be discouraged by the threat of dark things. We don't have to lose our hope when we don't know how to fight against what's hard in our lives. The power of God is so much greater.

The account of the sons of Sceva is a weird and funny story. Sceva is some sort of high priest, so his sons grew up familiar with religion and God and the Scriptures. They think they can direct spiritual powers. There are both demons and exorcists all over Ephesus. The place is awash in black magic, séances, trinkets to fight off the evil eye, and so on. These young men have heard about the new Christians, about lives that are being changed and freedom from sin. The Christian movement has authority. So they decide to use as their new incantation “the Jesus whom Paul preaches” to cast out demons. But they attempt to cast out a real demon from a certain man, and the demon answers: “I know Jesus, and I know about Paul, but who are you?” Then this demonic strength overtakes these seven men, and they are beaten to a pulp by the man who has the demon. They run naked and bleeding into the street.

Odd as it is, this story makes a couple of points. One point is that if we're trying to deal with dark powers on our own, we're making a big mistake. Or if we think it's just a game, we're making a really big mistake! There's a little bit of that in demon-inspired video games. There are people who have learned to think of spiritual power as something you can turn on and turn off, because it's only a game. Or they think amulets and that kind of thing really work. But there is a warning here. When we encounter a real evil presence, we are no match for it. These men end up beaten, naked, bleeding, tossed out into the street.

The other point is that the power of God, which is infinitely greater than the power of wickedness, isn't at our beck and call. We don't whistle and have God come. We don't appeal to a God someone else believes in and have him respond.

What is the result of the ridicule of demons? What is the result of these imitation exorcists' naming the name of Jesus? What happens to this stronghold? Verse 17: “When this became known to the Jews and Greeks living in Ephesus, they were all seized with fear, and the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honor.” Verse 20: “In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power.” This place of witchcraft and darkness was becoming a place where Christ was increasingly honored. A bonfire was lit in Ephesus. It seems as if everyone in the city had a book of magic incantations, appeals to the dark lords, and devilish prayers tucked away somewhere, and they all brought their books of sorcery and threw them on the bonfire, because they realized the Lord God was changing their place. What they had trusted in or feared or wondered about was no longer worth giving attention to. A revival was beginning in Ephesus.

There are stories being told today of revival in India. Tens of thousands of outcasts, those who have been on the absolute margin of Indian society, are believing in the love of God, and there's a revolution happening. Whole regions of people who have been denied hope, standing of any kind, education, or a future are being changed because of this spreading flame of hope. Outcasts are looking forward to the day when their children will be educated and they will have a place. It's not going to stay the same. The ruinous ideas are going to be overcome.

Periodically we hear stories of revival in prison. A revolution of love takes place between rival gangs. God shows up in power, and gang members throw down their weapons, stop cursing one another, and begin to sing hymns together in prison fellowships. What was terrible is stopped by an act of God. Change occurs and Jesus is honored.

The last thing that happened in Ephesus was a riot.

Ridiculous resistance

There was widespread growth in the respect given to the gospel of Christ. The imitation exorcists were unsuccessful, and every effort to use a false version of Christian power only made the real thing more attractive. Every form of resistance by evil spirits or evil ideas was failing. So the last resort was mob violence. Verses 23-41:

About that time, there arose a great disturbance about the Way. A silversmith named Demetrius, who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought in no little business for the craftsmen. He called them together, along with the workmen in related trades, and said: “Men, you know we receive a good income from this business. And you see and hear how this fellow Paul has convinced and led astray large numbers of people here in Ephesus, and in practically the whole province of Asia. He says that man-made gods are no gods at all. There is danger not only that our trade will lose its good name, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be discredited, and the goddess herself, who is worshiped throughout the province of Asia and the world, will be robbed of her divine majesty.”

When they heard this, they were furious and began shouting: “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” Soon the whole city was in an uproar. The people seized Gaius and Aristarchus, Paul’s traveling companions from Macedonia, and rushed as one man into the theater. Paul wanted to appear before the crowd, but the disciples would not let him. Even some of the officials of the province, friends of Paul, sent him a message, begging him not to venture into the theater.

The assembly was in confusion: Some were shouting one thing, some another. Most of the people did not even know why they were there. The Jews pushed Alexander to the front, and some of the crowd shouted instructions to him. He motioned for silence in order to make a defense before the people. But when they realized he was a Jew, they all shouted in unison for about two hours: “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!”

The city clerk quieted the crowd and said: “Men of Ephesus, doesn’t all the world know that the city of Ephesus is the guardian of the temple of the great Artemis and of her image, which fell from heaven? Therefore, since these facts are undeniable, you ought to be quiet and not do anything rash. You have brought these men here, though they have neither robbed temples nor blasphemed our goddess. If, then, Demetrius and his fellow craftsmen have a grievance against anybody, the courts are open and there are proconsuls. They can press charges. If there is anything further you want to bring up, it must be settled in a legal assembly. As it is, we are in danger of being charged with rioting because of today’s events. In that case we would not be able to account for this commotion, since there is no reason for it.” After he said this, he dismissed the assembly.

Having arrived in the theater, half of this mob of people are confused and don’t even know why they are there, highlighting the silliness of the resistance. For hours they yell, “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians! Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” In retrospect, people in a mob end up looking ridiculous in many ways, don’t they? Everything that’s going on seems important at the time, and the adrenalin is rushing, and slogans are being yelled. But once people have reduced themselves to shouting slogans, they’ve stopped thinking, acting rationally, or being responsible.

Demetrius, the leader of all this, ironically, manages to accurately express what Paul teaches: that manmade gods are no gods at all. So he himself furthers the movement in which good is overcoming evil.

There is clearly an economic genesis to this riot, as well as regional pride. The temple to Artemis (or Diana) was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Now its importance is being reduced and craftsmen are selling fewer temple-related artifacts.

The story ends when these people have shouted themselves hoarse, and finally a legal official declares, “First of

all, these men didn't do anything wrong. If we do anything illegal, Rome is going to exact retribution. So everybody go home!" It's almost like children being sent to their rooms without supper. This great effort to push back against the cause of Christ in effect peters out and looks ridiculous.

Again, we realize that there is one name growing in honor, and every effort to stand against it is being undone. This wonderful outcome isn't because of Christian ministry strategy. There's no reference to Christians' reaching out or advancing. God simply decides it's time for Ephesus to be made new. Demons are banished, books of witchcraft are burned, rioters look like fools, their goddess is diminished, and the place changes.

When our Lord decides to intervene in a life or a place or in history, when it's God's timing that revival should occur, when the Lord intends to deal with the thing you've been afraid of, it will happen. You must not fear that the darkness can overcome the light. It cannot. We don't always know when God will act. But what we do know for sure is that when he determines to act, nothing can withstand his determination. Every neck that is stiffened, every arm that is raised, every voice that is sounded against Christ and his claims, will fall.

We need to make this as personal as possible. Perhaps at this point in your life you are terrified. You're fighting something that you think is too big for you. You don't know how your circumstances will ever change. But they will. I don't know how God will intervene or when. But when God acts, the chains that seem like impossible shackles are struck off. Strongholds fall when he orders them to. Trust in the Lord and look for his salvation.

Notes

(1) Ray C. Stedman, *Off Witchcraft!*, Message No. 11, © 1970, 2002, Discovery Publishing, Peninsula Bible Church, Palo Alto, CA.

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