

WHEN EVIL DOES ITS WORST

SERIES: SENT: LIVING THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH.



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Acts 18:24–19:20
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Acts 18:1-22

When the Jewish leaders came to arrest Jesus, he told them, “Have you come out as against a robber, with swords and clubs? 53 When I was with you day after day in the temple, you did not lay hands on me. But this is your hour, and the power of darkness” (Luke 22:52-53). Evil, having been somewhat restrained earlier, is now free to do its worst. The “power of darkness” is given an “hour.”

Jesus sends us into the world—a world from which evil has not yet been vanquished. As he does so, we encounter all sorts of problems, some of which are wrapped up with evil. What do we do in the face of such problems? In our narrative today, evil is present and active. We learn both from how the apostle Paul responds and from how he doesn’t respond.

The narrative features two pairs of stories that take place in the city of Ephesus:

- A. Acts 18:24-28: Apollos knows only the baptism of John
 - A’ Acts 19:1-7: Ephesian disciples only baptized into John
- B. Acts 19:8-10: Opponents speak evil of the Way
 - B’ Acts 19:11-16: Evil spirit overpowers exorcists

Apollos knows only the baptism of John

Acts 18:24-28:

Now a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was an eloquent man, competent in the Scriptures. 25 He had been instructed in the way of the Lord. And being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John. 26 He began to speak boldly in the synagogue, but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately.

27 And when he wished to cross to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him. When he arrived, he greatly helped those who through grace had believed, 28 for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the Scriptures that the Christ was Jesus.

Apollos may have been “instructed” in the way of the Lord, but he hadn’t been fully instructed. He may have spoken and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, but he spoke and taught incompletely.

He knew about the baptism of John but not about the baptism of Jesus. Those who believed in, and were baptized into, Jesus would receive the Holy Spirit, as John the Baptist himself earlier declared: “I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Luke 3:16). Although Apollos knew of the baptism of John, he wasn’t aware of everything that John had taught.

From Luke’s account, we can surmise that Apollos was not instructing people to be baptized in the name of Jesus. We don’t know whether he was teaching people anything about the Holy Spirit.

Priscilla and Aquila, who were companions of Paul, recognize that Apollos’ teaching is incomplete, so they take it upon themselves to clue him in. Even though Apollos is speaking boldly in the synagogue, Priscilla and Aquila don’t see the need publicly to instruct him. Instead, they discreetly take him aside.

When you try to correct someone, especially someone as gifted and powerful as Apollos, how often do they say, “Thank you so much for pointing out for me the error of my ways”? How often, instead, do they blow you off? Evidently, Apollos—no prima donna, he—welcomed the instruction of Priscilla and Aquila.

We don't know the effect of Apollos' teaching before Priscilla and Aquila pulled him aside. We know that he was "eloquent," "competent in the Scriptures," and "fervent in spirit," but we don't know anything of how people responded to him. After Apollos had understood the way of God more accurately, however, the narrator tells us that he "greatly helped" believers in Achaia.

After Apollos left Ephesus, Paul arrives.

Ephesian disciples only baptized into John

Acts 19:1-7:

And it happened that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the inland country and came to Ephesus. There he found some disciples. 2 And he said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" And they said, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." 3 And he said, "Into what then were you baptized?" They said, "Into John's baptism." 4 And Paul said, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus." 5 On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. 6 And when Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking in tongues and prophesying. 7 There were about twelve men in all.

The "disciples" in Ephesus, having "believed"—evidently, having believed in Jesus—are evidently disciples of Jesus. True, they have not yet received the Spirit, but they, like Apollos, are caught in a transitional time. Like Apollos, they need further instruction. Just as Priscilla and Aquila came to the aid of Apollos, Paul comes to the aid of these disciples.

Not only have these disciples not received the Holy Spirit, but they also don't even know that there is a Holy Spirit. Like Apollos, the disciples are familiar with the baptism of John. In fact, they have been baptized into John's baptism, though they didn't understand the meaning of that baptism.

Paul sets them straight. John baptized people to get them ready for Jesus, the Messiah. His was, therefore, a "baptism of repentance." By submitting to John's baptism, you were repenting (turning away from your present sinful ways) so that you would be ready to believe (turning to Jesus and his righteous ways). The disciples

of Ephesus were baptized into John, and they evidently believed in Jesus, but they hadn't been baptized into Jesus. Like Apollos, they are amenable to correction: once they understand what they've been missing, they are baptized "in the name of the Lord Jesus."

Even then, they don't receive the Holy Spirit. Only when Paul lays his hands on them does the Holy Spirit come upon them. Just like the first disciples, the disciples of Ephesus speak literally "with" tongues and prophesy. Luke does not tell us whether they, like the first disciples in Acts 2, speak in human languages that were unknown to them; nor does he tell us whether they instead, like the Corinthians, employ an inarticulate, non-communicative form of utterance (1 Corinthians 12-14). What form their prophecies take—whether they, like the first disciples, are speaking of "the mighty works of God" in other human languages—Luke doesn't say. In any event, their miraculous ability to speak with tongues and prophesy serves as evidence to them that what Paul told them is true and that they belong to Jesus.

Things happen irregularly

When the Spirit first came, in Jerusalem, he came upon the first believers, who then spoke with tongues (Acts 2:1-13).¹ People in Samaria believed in Jesus and were baptized, but they didn't receive the Spirit until Peter and John came from Jerusalem to pray for them and lay hands on them. It is not reported whether they spoke with tongues (Acts 8:12-17). People in Caesarea who aren't even reported as having believed and who hadn't even been baptized nevertheless received the Spirit and began speaking with tongues. Only after they receive the Spirit are then baptized "in the name of Jesus" (Acts 10:44-48).

In Acts, the sequence of coming to faith, baptism, the laying on of hands, the coming of Spirit, speaking with tongues, and prophesying is inconsistent. Moreover, not all of those elements are present when the Spirit comes on groups of people. When the kingdom of God broke into this world through the Spirit, he broke out in unpredictable ways. If we were to focus solely on the book of Acts, we would be like both Apollos and the disciples in Ephesus: we would need to be more fully instructed.

To be more fully instructed, we turn to the epistles: Romans through Jude. From the epistles, most importantly we learn that the Spirit dwells in and among those who believe in Jesus, whether or not anyone lays hands on them, whether or not they have been baptized, whether or not they speak with tongues, and whether

or not they prophesy. Baptism, though not essential for salvation, is still essential. The New Testament does not know of an unbaptized believer.

Easy solutions

In these two stories, the problems are clearly identifiable, the solutions are readily apparent, and results are perfectly acceptable. Problem No. 1: Apollos' teaching is lacking because he didn't know about the baptism of Jesus, which featured the Spirit. Solution: Explain to him the way of God more accurately. Results: Apollos greatly helps others with his newly informed teaching. Easy. Problem No. 2: The Ephesian disciples had not received the Spirit, having only experienced the baptism of John. Solution: teach them and baptize them. Results: the Spirit comes upon them. Easy.

Sometimes, the problems of home and church and work and school are easily solvable. Sometimes, God makes it easy for us. If we had to pray for wisdom and painstakingly search for God's will in any and every circumstance, we'd never have time for anything else. The problems that require decisions come fast and furious. Often, you just have to make a quick decision and move on to the next decision. Sometimes, God blesses such a decision, and it solves the problem.

I like these kinds of problems. Well, I don't like any kind of problem, but if there are going to be problems, this is the way I like them served up: easily identifiable, with readily apparent solutions and perfectly acceptable results. I like things easy. You do too, don't you?

Sometimes, problems are easily solvable. Other times . . . well, let's look at the next story.

Opponents speak evil of the Way

Acts 19:8-10:

And he entered the synagogue and for three months spoke boldly, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God. 9 But when some became stubborn 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. 10 This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.

Paul encounters a different, albeit familiar, problem in the synagogue of Ephesus. Outside the synagogue, he had to instruct disciples who lacked knowledge. Inside the synagogue, he has to face stubborn unbelievers who tell others in the synagogue that his teaching about Jesus amounts to "evil." Whereas Priscilla and Aquila could instruct Apollos and whereas Paul could instruct the disciples, instructing such opponents is not a workable solution. How can you teach people who think that your teaching is evil?

Therefore, Paul withdraws from the synagogue and moves his base of operations to something called the hall of Tyrannus. The hall wasn't his first choice. The synagogue was his first choice. But Paul was only able to spend three months in the synagogue before opposition forced him out. He spends two years in the hall.

The result? Luke tells us "all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks." He doesn't tell us how this happened. Ephesus was a port city, the hub of trade routes. The likely explanation is that the word of the Lord spread through people who received Paul's instruction and then moved on to other places. Moving his base of operations to the hall of Tyrannus was a brilliant strategic move—except that Paul didn't think of it until he had to.

By the way, when I think about the hall of Tyrannus, I think about our church. People come to the Silicon Valley—and to PBC—from all over the world for work or school. Many people are only here for a little while before God moves them on. We have the opportunity to teach them and love them for a season and send them on their way better equipped to follow the Lord.

God has allowed us through our Intern Program, now newly imagined as the Institute of Bible and Culture, to train people whom he has now placed in many different parts of the world. I've led the program for the past fifteen years, and well more than half of the people we've trained are blessing people in other places. How long did Paul spend in the hall of Tyrannus? Two years. How long does it take to go through our Institute of Bible and Culture? Two years. Just saying.

Watch for new opportunities

In this story, the problem is clearly identifiable, but the solution isn't readily apparent, and the results are thoroughly disheartening. Sometimes, the problems of home and church and work and school are easily solvable. Other times, they're not. Sometimes, God makes it easy for us. Other times, he doesn't. Sometimes,

you're dealing with Apollos and the Ephesian disciples. Other times, you're dealing with stubborn, unbelieving, evil-speaking synagogue-goers. You can reason with some people, and they'll respond. You can reason with other people, and they'll slander you.

If the results are disheartening, however, might there be another approach? Might there be an approach that you wouldn't have even thought of unless your first approach got you nowhere? Might you not have even thought of teaching in the hall of Tyrannus, for example, unless you were slandered in the synagogue? When the door to the synagogue of Ephesus closes, the door to the hall of Tyrannus opens. And perhaps the new approach will serve the purposes of the Gospel, as it did in Paul's case. When you encounter problems, sure, try to solve them, but also watch for new opportunities.

A young boy growing up in England at the beginning of the twentieth century longed to make things: ships, houses, engines. But he suffered from extreme manual clumsiness. He had a physical defect: he couldn't bend his thumb.

He explains: "Many sheets of cardboard and pairs of scissors I spoiled, only to turn from my hopeless failures in tears. As a last resource, as a pis aller, I was driven to write stories instead, little dreaming to what a world of happiness I was being admitted. You can do more with a castle in a story than with the best cardboard castle that ever stood on a nursery table."

The man's name? C.S. Lewis. ² He wasn't able to do what he at first wanted to do, but the door opened to Narnia.

Like Rhett Butler in *Gone with the Wind*, I have a "weakness for lost causes, once they're really lost," so I tend to hold on to things way too long. Earlier in my life, I did everything I could to make certain relationships work that really weren't meant to work. When I finally let go, new opportunities opened up before me, one of which included the birth of the Young Adults Fellowship twenty-one years ago. Once I stopped investing in a dead relationship, I found new vision and new energy for a new ministry.

I wonder: What doors will God open for us?

Whereas opponents speak "evil" of the Gospel in this story, an "evil" spirit creates a problem in the next story.

Evil spirit overpowers exorcists

Acts 19:11-16:

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. 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 of them and overpowered them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded.

In this story, the word "evil" is used four times in connection with "evil" spirits—that is, demons. As a result of Paul's presence in Ephesus, evil spirits were coming out of people. Some traveling Jewish exorcists, including seven sons of Sceva, try their hand at it, with considerably less effectiveness. Paul, one man who believed in Jesus, was able to cast multiple evil spirits out of multiple people without even being in their presence. By contrast, seven men who don't believe in Jesus invoke the name of Jesus and fail to cast even one evil spirit out of one man who is standing right in front of them. The sons of Sceva try to tap into the power of the Gospel without believing the Gospel. They acknowledge that Paul "proclaims" Jesus, but they don't even claim to proclaim Jesus.

The evil spirit's response to the sons of Sceva is classic: "Jesus I know, and Paul I recognize but who are you?" Well, who are they? They aren't Jesus, the Christ. They aren't Paul, an apostle of Jesus. They aren't even believers in Jesus. To the evil spirit, they're nobodies. The name of Jesus means nothing to the evil spirit if it's being hijacked by people don't know Jesus.

The evil spirit has the seven sons of Sceva for lunch. Bad scene, right? Well, read on.

The name of the Lord Jesus is extolled

Acts 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. 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.

Word got out about the men's disastrous encounter with the evil spirit, and as a result, "the name of the Lord Jesus was extolled." People in Ephesus heard that the evil spirit both recognized the name of Jesus and took particular umbrage when it was invoked. Moreover, they recognized that the name of Jesus was different from other names invoked by exorcists and magicians.

After unbelieving and stubborn Jews had spoken evil of the Gospel in the synagogue, "all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks." After an evil spirit had overpowered seven men, "this became known to all the residents of Ephesus, both Jews and Greeks." By use of repetition, Luke wants us to see that the two events are related. In each case, there is evil activity. In each case, evil actually ends up serving the purposes of the Gospel.

In this case, evil activity ends up serving the purposes of the Gospel in more ways than one. Many of the new believers repented of their magic practices to the extent that some of them parted with their pricey books, the total of which was the equivalent of a day's wages for fifty thousand people.

Watch for what God does

In the final story, the problem, again, is clearly identifiable. Actually, there are two clearly identifiable problems: some yahoos misuse the name of Jesus, and an evil spirit prevails. And the solution? What solution? There isn't one! Paul is not reported as doing anything. As far as we know, he doesn't rebuke or correct the seven sons of Sceva, and he doesn't cast out the evil spirit that overpowered them. And the results? Incalculable. What a non-solution!

Sometimes, the problems of home and church and work and school are easily solvable. Other times, when they're not, you're forced to come up with an approach that you wouldn't have thought of otherwise. Still other times, the problems aren't your problems. Every problem isn't your problem, is it?

When you encounter problems, sure, try to solve them, if you discern that they're your problems, but also watch for new opportunities and for what God does. Why? Because he does what you cannot do, and when he does it, and when you see it, he takes your breath away. After all, life isn't about solving problems; life is about worship.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning in her poem "Aurora Leigh" writes:

*Earth is crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes,
The rest sit around it and pluck blackberries*

When I think about what God has done in my life, especially when I've encountered problems, I think about the intimacy that he's created for me with him. Sometimes, in the face of problems, I've stopped plucking blackberries and started taking off my shoes, so to speak. What he's shown me about himself, particularly about his love for me, has taken my breath away.

I wonder: what will we see?

In the four stories, all this bad stuff happens, but it turns into good stuff. What's the explanation?

God does his best

Acts 19:20:

So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily.

The verse would be more literally translated, "So according to the strength of the Lord, the word was increasing and prevailing." In these four stories, in the face of problems and even outright evil, the "word"—that is, the Gospel message—increases and prevails in remarkable ways. How does it do so? Because of Priscilla and Aquila and Apollos and Paul? You could make the case that they had something to do with the advance of the Gospel, and indeed, they each had a part to play. But

Luke tells us that the Gospel increased and prevailed because of the strength of the Lord. The Lord made the readily apparent solutions effective, he made the no-so-readily-apparent solution effective, and he made the non-solution effective. The word of the Lord increased and prevailed because of the strength of the Lord.

Notice again the difference between the first and second pairs of stories. In the first pair, the problems are easily solvable. In the second pair, the problems are greater because of evil opposition. But consider this: the greater the problem, the more the Gospel advances. In the third story, where opponents speak evil, “all” the residents of Asia heard the word. In the fourth story, the triumph of an evil spirit became known to “all” the residents of Ephesus, fear fell upon them “all,” and contrite believers burned their expensive magic books in the sight of “all.”

The really powerful stuff happens when evil is present and active. When evil does its worst, watch for new opportunities, and watch for what God does. Why? Because when evil does its worst, God does his best.

When did evil do its absolute worst? When the Jewish leaders laid hands on Jesus and delivered him over to the Roman governor, when the governor handed him over to soldiers, when soldiers nailed him to a cross, when everyone abused him as he was dying on the cross. What did God do? He raised Jesus from the dead and won our redemption. When evil did its worst, God did his best.

Today you may be facing a seemingly insurmountable problem, and maybe that insurmountable problem is even wrapped up with evil. Watch for new opportunities, and watch for what God does.

Endnotes

¹ See my sermon on Acts 2: <http://www.pbc.org/messages/cut-to-the-heart>.

² Lewis, C.S., *Surprised by Joy* (San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1955), 12., 5:1-13.