

Acts 19:1-20

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[0 : 00] Good morning, everyone. If you have a Bible, you can turn to Acts chapter 19. If you have one of these green ones, there's a few at the back.

If you'd like to jump up, stretch your legs, go and grab one, you're very welcome. It's on page 1115. Okay, so I'm going to read from verse 1 down to verse 20 of Acts chapter 19.

While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples and asked them, Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed? They answered, No, we've not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit. So Paul asked, Then what baptism did you receive? John's baptism, they replied. Paul said, John's baptism was a baptism of repentance.

He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus. On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied.

[1 : 24] There are about 12 men in all. 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. So Paul left them. He took the disciples with him, and he had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus.

This went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord. God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, so that even handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him were taken to those who were ill, and their illnesses were cured, and the evil spirits left them.

Some Jews 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 the Jesus whom Paul preaches, I command you to come out.

Seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, were doing this. One day the evil spirit answered them, Jesus I know, and Paul I know about, but who are you?

[2 : 46] 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 what they had done. 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 50,000 drachmas.

In this way, the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power. So let's pray as we look at God's word together just now.

Heavenly Father, we thank you so much for your word. Thank you that you have given it to us in a way that we can understand, in our own language translated for us.

So Lord, as we read, we can hear your voice and be transformed by your spirit. We pray that that would happen for us now, that we would hear your voice and be transformed by your spirit.

[4 : 06] We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, the word ultimate is often used a lot these days, isn't it?

The ultimate gadget for 2025. The ultimate book list. These are the books that you have to read. Or maybe over Christmas, you cooked the ultimate Christmas dinner.

Or we see in competitive sports, the ultimate fighter. Or in music, the ultimate band. Or in sports, the ultimate team.

There's something good. But then it's suddenly replaced by something better. The ultimate. The ultimate travel experience. The ultimate car. The ultimate job. Something greater. Something greater. Better. Stronger.

[5 : 07] Faster comes to replace what was already there. But you know the thing about all of these ultimates. Well, none of them are really ultimate at all.

We'll have a new ultimate gadget for 2026. We'll have the ultimate car in 10 years' time. The ultimate team. The ultimate team changes every year.

Well, today we are thinking about something that really is ultimate. It's the ultimate power of God. The ultimate power of God. It can never be replaced. Never be beaten. Never conquered. It is the ultimate.

And it's what we need. And we are invited to experience that power through Jesus. So in our passage today, we start out with Paul making his way to Ephesus.

[6 : 16] He starts his journey, and no sooner has he arrived, he's found some disciples. And he asks them, have you received the Holy Spirit? Maybe it's not the first question I would ask some disciples I found.

I might introduce myself and maybe get to, when did you become a Christian? Maybe later in the conversation. Paul straight in, do you have the Spirit? He said, no, we didn't even know there was a Holy Spirit.

And it turns out that these disciples had believed and been following the way of John, the way of John the Baptist. And they'd been baptized in John's baptism, not in the name of the Lord Jesus. And we see here, ultimate power is given. Ultimate power is given. We're all on a journey of faith. Each one of us. We each have had experiences in our lives. We've had teaching of different kinds.

[7 : 28] We all believe something. Even if someone says, I believe in nothing. You believe in something that there is nothing.

Well, we meet these 12 disciples of John on their journey of faith. And we realize that the journey itself is not enough.

The destination matters. Maybe today we hear phrases like, we all need to follow our own path. Find yourself or find your way.

Or maybe when it comes to religion, don't all paths lead to God? Or isn't it just faith that's important?

It doesn't really matter what you believe in. If you have faith, then we'll make it in the end. Well, as we'll see here, even though these disciples had received a baptism of repentance, they had not received the Holy Spirit.

[8 : 36] They needed to be taught about Jesus. The journey of faith that you are on is ultimately useless if it doesn't find Jesus.

Jesus is the ultimate and only God and Savior. And any road that bypasses him is useless.

And even if you get some of the way, like these disciples, maybe you think, well, we go to church and we hear about Jesus, and we live a good life.

We smile and we chat. We're nice to people. Is that not enough? No, that is not enough.

If that all it is, then you have not received ultimate power. You have not received the Holy Spirit.

And so here, for these disciples who want to pursue faith, they need to be taught about Jesus.

[9 : 49] And so Paul does that. He teaches these disciples about Jesus, and they realize they need him, and so they're baptized in Jesus' name. And they receive ultimate power, the power of the Holy Spirit.

This is demonstrated in visible signs right there and then. They speak in tongues. They prophesy. The fullness of the Spirit has come into their lives.

The ultimate power of God brings fullness. The Holy Spirit is a person that we experience, not just relate to academically, but he brings fullness and power and transformation to our lives.

So we can expect to be changed by him and to experience help from him. So have you received the Holy Spirit?

Has God given his ultimate power to you through faith in Jesus? If you're on a journey of faith that does not include the Lord Jesus Christ, then you need to listen up and hear that Jesus is the one you need.

[11 : 10] That ultimate power is only available in him. This life-changing, eternity-shaping, joy-giving power.

So we see ultimate power being given to these disciples who turn to Jesus. Well, Paul went on from there to have a teaching ministry in Ephesus.

Look at verse 8. We see he entered the synagogue. He spoke boldly there for three months. Verse 9. Some of them became obstinate. They refused to believe and publicly maligned the way.

So Paul left them. He took the disciples with him and had discussions daily in the lecture hall. This went on for two years so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord.

Paul was teaching and discussing daily with people about the kingdom of God. This went on for two years so that the word of the Lord was heard by all in that region.

[12:19] As Paul was teaching and discussing, that teaching and discussions carried on and spread through the region so that all those living in the province of Asia had heard about Jesus.

And as we move through the text, let me tell you something about Ephesus. This city had a reputation as a center for the learning and practice of magical arts.

There was even a phrase that was used in ancient times, Ephesian writings, which would commonly refer to documents containing spells or formulae.

This was a place that was in the grip of the occult, in bondage to dark powers and demonic forces. So it's no wonder what we see happen next during Paul's ministry.

Second thing today, God's ultimate power is demonstrated. God's ultimate power is demonstrated.

[13:39] We see in verse 11, God did extraordinary miracles through Paul. This is a real power encounter.

The demonic powers in Ephesus meet the ultimate power of God. It reminds me of a couple of stories from the Bible when Elijah challenges the prophets of Baal to the contest on Mount Sinai. Who is going to win? Yahweh or Baal? Who's more powerful? Or when God demonstrated His power over the gods of Egypt, who was more powerful?

Yahweh or these gods of Egypt? Well, God was demonstrating His ultimate power through Paul and extraordinary miracles were performed.

Look at the next part of the sentence, verse 12, so that even handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched Him were taken to those who were ill and their illnesses were cured and evil spirits left them.

[14:54] This is extraordinary stuff. In a place where symbols and power is so relevant in Ephesus, God uses symbols like handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched Paul to bring healing and deliverance.

Deliverance from those dark powers, even these tiny handkerchiefs God would use to defeat the dark powers of evil. And it's helpful to remember who or what brought this healing.

It's at the start of that verse 11, God did extraordinary miracles. The clash of powers is happening and God's ultimate power is bringing healing and deliverance from the grip of evil.

The practice of magic, of witchcraft, and the occult are dangerous things to be involved with. It's not all just made up and make believe.

You see, there is a reality of power, power, but it's demonic power. It's not from God. It's from Satan.

[16:26] This power is not from God. So what is it that drives people today to the occult, to the practice of magic?

Here in Skibarine, here in West Cork, we see it happening around us. A fascination, a fear, a curiosity.

Maybe a fear of the unknown. So people seek guidance or answers. Maybe it's fear of the future. They want a glimpse of what's going to happen or fear of the past.

Maybe it's a fear of displeasing cosmic entities or powers. Or maybe that curiosity or a sense that there's more than what we can see.

Well, in Ephesus, God was demonstrating His ultimate power. That He overcomes any dark powers and is the greatest, most powerful of all.

[17:37] So if you have that fear or curiosity or a feeling of longing for more, God is the ultimate power that we can seek and we can be satisfied in.

And in fact, God's awesome power should cause us to fear Him. not debilitating, trembling fear that causes us to run away from God, but awestruck wonder that causes us to run towards Him.

God's ultimate power is demonstrated in Ephesus through these signs and wonders of Paul's ministry. So then I think let's not be surprised when we see God working miracles in situations in the world where a demonstration of power is what's needed to transform lives.

And if you think sometimes like me, well, I've not seen that demonstration of power. There is one ultimate demonstration for all to see that God has shown to the world where He has ultimately defeated the power of darkness.

It's at the cross. The cross of Christ we see God's ultimate power on show. As He defeats the powers of darkness once and for all and He opens the way to forgiveness and life and He does it displaying His eternal love and His righteous justice.

[19 : 34] So let's continue. Let's trust for the first time in Jesus' ultimate sacrifice and experience the power of God for yourself. Be set free from the power of darkness and experience the fullness of God.

So we see God's ultimate power demonstrated. Now in our passage we come to a very unusual and a slightly comical story.

I don't know if you smirked or laughed as you came through these verses and it appears that what God is doing through Paul was so effective and so powerful that others wanted in on the action. They wanted to imitate what was happening and we see thirdly ultimate power imitated. Look again from verse 13.

There were these Jews went around driving out evil spirits tried to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who were demon possessed. Verse 14 Seven sons of Sceva a Jewish chief priest were doing this.

[20 : 51] One day the evil spirit answered them Jesus I know and Paul I know about but who are you? Then the man who had the evil spirit jumped on them overpowered them all and he gave them such a beating they ran out of the house naked and bleeding.

What a crazy story. These sons of Sceva they wanted in on the action. They wanted to drive out these spirits spirits as well but they did not know Jesus.

They did not have the Holy Spirit listen to the way that they speak. In the name of the Jesus that Paul preaches there is clearly no personal relationship connection with Jesus.

There is no presence of the Holy Spirit there and the interaction with this evil spirit tells us as much. These imitators of power are overcome by evil power.

These seven sons were given such a beating that they ran from the house naked and bleeding. and you know what we see?

[22 : 14] This power of God over darkness could not be imitated. It could not be drummed up or recreated. Only God could do these things.

It was God's power at work through Paul's ministry not Paul in and of himself or anyone else doing these things. It was God working by his power not these imitators.

Now I'm a fan of watches. I love watches. I'm fascinated by how they work. I like to learn about them. I'm curious about what they're like and what they do.

And I've come across videos where people compare a genuine watch with a fake watch, an imitation. And sometimes on the surface they look very similar.

Very convincing. And one of the most famous brands in the world in watches is Rolex. These are one of the most famous watch brands that there is.

[23 : 23] And it was recently estimated that there are over 23 million fake watches just in the US circulating. And over half of these are fake Rolex watches.

But when you dig deeper into the watch, you open up the watch, you look inside, the experts examine what's there, they can see the fake.

They can see the imitation. And I think this story can be a warning to us. It may seem very alluring to be seen as a good Christian.

Christian. Maybe it suits your image. Maybe it suits within your family. There's less confrontation if I just go along with everything.

Maybe it helps you feel better. Maybe it gives you some goal to work towards. But how many of us are imitators?

[24 : 27] are we just wanting to reap the benefits of being called a Christian, but we don't really trust in Jesus for ourselves?

Like these men wanting in on the action. They wanted all the power and experience and blessing, but they didn't know Jesus. It's a dangerous path to walk, to be an imitator, to be a fake, and as we see here, it doesn't have a good ending.

Ultimately, they are overcome by evil. The ultimate power of God cannot be imitated, so let's be authentic.

Let's ensure we're trusting in Jesus ourselves personally, and from there, everything else we do can flow. and then lastly, what we see is that ultimate power transforms.

Ultimate power transforms. We see in verse 17, when all of this became known, people were seized with fear, and Jesus' name was held in high honor.

[25 : 49] This guy is serious. He is worthy of respect and honor. He is not someone to be messed with, not someone to be written off.

Jesus is worthy of our attention and our worship. And as we see lives being transformed through coming to experience this ultimate power of God through Jesus.

Look at verse 18 and 19. It says, many of those who believed now came and openly confessed what they had done. A number who practiced sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly.

People came and they confessed their sin. They confessed what they had done. I did this. I practiced magic. I have these scrolls. I trusted in the powers of darkness, but now I've seen the light.

there was an openness and honesty about their repentance. See, the thing about sin is it's not really surprising.

[27 : 06] We all struggle and we all fail and sin is common throughout all of humanity. So actually when sin happens, we shouldn't be surprised. but the lie we believe is that I am the only one who has done this.

No one has done anything like this. No one is as messed up as I am. Honesty and openness about our sin and repentance is a way of challenging and encouraging and breaking free from patterns that bind us.

So we need to find helpful ways of sharing this, of finding trusted fellow believers that we can go to and say, I'm struggling with this, and they'll say, yeah, me too.

that we can be open and honest with family members who trust the Lord, with friends who we can trust in, in a small group setting where there's confidence that we can come and share and be honest and help each other through life.

And what we'll find is we're not alone, that sin is everywhere and the Lord is changing each of us.

[28 : 37] And we see the people here, some who practice sorcery, well, they brought their scrolls, they brought their spells and their incantations, and they burned them.

They were done. They were cutting ties, there is no way back. The darkness of the past is gone, and we're moving forward in light.

They were taking drastic action to demonstrate this change of direction. It's a symbol of renouncement. They're renouncing old ways, even though there was a great cost.

These were valuable scrolls. You could have maybe sold them, maybe get your money back. No. These needed to be destroyed, never to be returned to.

The text tells us about 50,000 drachmas. A drachma was about the average daily wage of a worker. What does that mean for you?

[29 : 46] 50,000 daily wages. That's in the millions. So as a challenge to us as we finish this morning, what are your magic scrolls?

What are those things that we need to renounce that we can never go back to? I'm not suggesting a book-burning ceremony, but I am suggesting that we think about those things that we need to turn away from, even though that may be costly to us.

But those things need to be removed. Maybe it's the company that we hold. Maybe it's those friends who bring us in a direction that's not helpful.

Maybe it's the content we consume. Maybe it's books or movies or music that take us away from Jesus. What are those magic scrolls for you that we need to cut ties with?

Remember, ultimate power transforms. As we come to know and experience the power of God, he changes our lives by his spirit, and he enables us to turn away from these things and turn towards him.

[31 : 19] I don't think these people in Ephesus were begrudgingly throwing their scrolls on the fire and thinking, why do I have to do this? They're saying, thank you, Lord, for delivering me.

This will be liberating and joyful as we are given power from God to do this, and we realize the immeasurable worth of following the Lord.

Our passage ends with a very simple summary of what was happening in the region. The word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power.

God was continuing to move as we see the story of Acts unfold. may he continue to do so in our lives and here in West Cork.

Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we thank you so much for your word. We thank you that you are the ultimate power, that in life as we desperately want something beyond ourselves, may we realize again and again that you are the ultimate source of power, that there is nothing outside of you that can satisfy, that can heal or transform.

[32 : 56] We thank you, Lord, that you have shown us your power and you continue to do so through your spirit. Lord, we pray for that transforming power will be at work in our lives.

Help us, Lord, to confront those things that we need to turn away from, to cut ties with, and Lord, change us so that we move forward joyfully, changed by your spirit, and going out so that your word would go out widely and your power would be known.

through your We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.