

# Acts 19:1-41

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well friends, if you want to open your Bibles back up to Acts chapter 19, that may be helpful. This is our last Sunday in our sermon series on Acts.

Next week we're going to be jumping backwards to the prophet Amos, which is going to get no less intense. But Acts has been pure joy. And one thing, if we've learned one thing over the last 10 weeks, it's that as Christians, the name of Jesus is all we have to stand on.

And in the end, it's all we have to offer. Think about that with me for a minute. Paul, Peter says at the beginning in Acts chapter 4 that there is no other name under heaven by which humanity might be saved.

We can administrate all we want. We can create the best programs and courses we want. We can do all the acts of kindness and love and mercy and justice we want. We can pray on our knees and give from our pockets as much as we want.

And all these things are really important and worth doing. But in the end, all we have to stand on and all we have to offer is the name of Jesus. And Acts wants to convince us that that is enough for the world.

[ 1 : 13 ] That is enough to save. It is enough to challenge and convict and comfort. The name of Jesus is enough to heal and sanctify and sustain in suffering.

The name of Jesus will turn cities upside down and it will set the prisoners free. The name of Jesus will humble the proud and it will lift up the lowly. The name of Jesus is enough.

As Paul would say later, it is a name that is above all other names. And at his name, every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that he is Lord.

So as we come to Acts chapter 9, what we are seeing is what happens when the name of Jesus dons the synagogue doors and hits the city streets. What happens when the name of Jesus comes to our cities?

Like Ephesus was the third largest urban center in the ancient world. What should we expect when the name of Jesus comes to those places? What is it that we should hope for?

[ 2 : 15 ] That's what we're discovering in Acts chapter 19. And what we see is two simple yet significant things. Gospel ministry in the city is messy.

And despite many obstacles, the word of God moves mightily and prevails persistently. We see this in verse 10.

It's a summary statement. Luke loves these summary statements throughout the book of Acts. This continued for two years, Paul teaching in the synagogue, even with stubborn hearts, so that all the residents of Asia, all the residents of Asia, heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.

And then in verse 20, again, we get another summary statement. So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily. So what Luke is trying to tell us is that although the gospel creates upheaval and brings all this resistance and makes life messy in the urban centers of our lives, the gospel is still victorious over our best efforts to limit, contain, or hide, or resist it.

The word of the Lord moves forward mightily and prevails. And in our passage, Luke tries to show us how this works with three groups of people.

[ 3 : 32 ] With the religious, we discover that the name of Jesus alone has the power to save.

With the superstitious, we discover that the name of Jesus alone has the power to set free. And with the idolatrous, we discover that the name of Jesus alone has the power to shake our idols and secure our hearts.

So let's begin with the religious. This is a little close to home base. In the first 10 verses, the religious come in two forms. In verses 1 to 7, it's those who have an incomplete knowledge of the gospel, but their hearts are open to it.

They need further instruction and rooting and grounding. And in verses 8 to 10, you get another group. It's those who have a robust knowledge of the gospel. Paul's been ministering them for years, telling them about that, but their hearts are stubborn.

They are not willing to receive and accept it. So the first group separates belief in Christ from the spirit of Christ, separates the call to repentance from new life in the spirit.

[ 4 : 43 ] And the second group hears the gift of new life, but refuses to repent. So, in some sense, they're the inverse of one another, the mere opposite of one another.

But it's the first group that Luke gives the most attention to. Why is this the case? Because I think it teaches us something very important about the Christian life. Namely, that the name of Jesus and repentance and the spirit of Jesus should never be separated.

The name of Jesus and repentance and the spirit of Jesus should never be separated. And we see this at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry. In each of the four gospels, John the Baptist kicks off the coming of the Messiah.

And John the Baptist says two things. His message is, repent for the forgiveness of your sins, and I will baptize you with water. But one who is coming after me will baptize you with the Holy Spirit, speaking of Jesus.

So, one of the first things we learn about Jesus is that he will come to baptize us in the Holy Spirit. What we discover quickly in the Christian life is that repentance without the spirit is like duty without love.

[ 5 : 54 ] Repentance without the spirit is like law without gospel. It's like truth without grace. It's like faith without hope. It just doesn't work in the end. Or it makes us incredibly tired in the process.

It's the difference between trying to push your car up the hill from standing behind it, and actually getting in your car and pressing the gas pedal and going.

The spirit is the true change agent in our lives. He's the one who propels us into the life of Christ, and then from the life of Christ propels us out into the world to share that life that we have received. And so repentance without the spirit becomes frustrating moralism. Our best religious efforts without dependence on the spirit do not liberate the soul.

They crush us and weigh us down. And so that's why in verse 2, Paul asks, Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed? Then they answer, No, we have not heard that there is a Holy Spirit.

[ 6 : 56 ] And notice the connection between receiving and hearing here. You cannot receive what you have not heard. And Paul presses on even further in verse 3.

Into what then were you baptized? And they say John's baptism. And Paul then sees the fundamental problem at hand. They have not been baptized in Jesus' name. John's baptism was meant to point to Jesus' baptism.

In other words, they have believed what John said about baptism and repentance, but they have not experienced and received what Jesus wants to give in his name and by the Spirit.

And so, in verse 5, Paul baptizes them in the name of Jesus, and that's the first time that important phrase shows up in our passage. And then he lays hands on them in verse 6, and they experience a mini-Pentecost, very similar to Acts chapter 2.

Now, the importance of this audible prophetic signs that happen after receiving the Spirit, and of the visible sign of laying on of hands, I think is not meant to uphold for us this normative paradigm for the Christian life, that it should always be this way, this type of conversion.

[ 8 : 13 ] But I think what these signs do for us, the audible and the visual, is they demonstrate that in this instance, these particular groups are really incorporated into Christ, and they really receive the Holy Spirit.

They are now experiencing the fullness of the Christian life. So what these signs do is they confirm for us the efficacy of God's saving word, and his saving work in people's lives.

As I said earlier, that's the main point of what's going on as the gospel comes to the religious. It's telling them that only the name of Jesus has the power to save them. And if you've been a follower of Jesus for any amount of time, you know that that's one of the easiest things to forget.

It's counterintuitive. But those that are often closest to Jesus, or exert the most effort in seeking to follow him, are those that can easily forget that it is only the power of his name that can save them. And it's only full immersion into the life of Jesus that brings the life of being filled with the Spirit of Jesus. And it's only the life of being filled with the Spirit of Jesus that really empowers us to go out into the world as the witnesses of Jesus.

[ 9 : 29 ] That's why for Paul, this is just no minor theological issue. This is the heart of the Christian life. And this is the heart of the church's mission. Because if we are to bear witness to Christ in this city, and if we are going to be the aroma of Christ to our neighbors, then we have to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

The religious are those who focus on repentance without Jesus and the Spirit. And that is not good news for anyone.

Especially when you encounter the messiness and complexity of city life. Which is what leads Paul to encountering the second group of people, not just the religious, but then in verses 11 to 20, he encounters the superstitious, where we discover that only the name of Jesus has the power to set free.

Now, I said earlier that Ephesus was a very significant city in the ancient world. It was a massive metropolis. And it was famous, for all its sophistication and education and wealth, for being the center, the epicenter, of practice of magic, witchcraft, and sorcery.

It's not dissimilar to the Pacific Northwest's reputation in North America. They believed, in other words, that there was a very porous border, or a very thin veil between the supernatural and the natural, in day-to-day life.

[ 10 : 58 ] And that the natural was constantly infused, and in many instances controlled by, supernatural beings and spiritual forces. So if you were to live a good and flourishing human life, you would have to learn how to gain the favor of the gods who had power over those forces, or to harness the power of those spirits that are at work in the world, or to seek personal freedom from the evil spirits that have taken control of your life.

And so this led to a deep fascination in Ephesus, bordering on obsession and fear of the spiritual world, because living in a world of magic is a cruel life.

This may sound to you like a long ways from 21st century modern life in Vancouver, but let me tell you it's not actually that far. Just this last Wednesday or Thursday, I forget what it was, we had a, Susie and I had a neighbor over for dinner.

We put the kids to bed, which took a while. Well, this young woman, she's in her young 20s, she's lovely, she's bright, she's in grad school, she's very ambitious career-wise.

And she, all of a sudden in the middle of the conversation, started sharing with me how people her age are becoming increasingly interested in evil souls or evil spirits. And I found this very interesting because I was looking at Acts chapter 19.

[ 12 : 24 ] And I learned from her that there's this whole world of social media influencers and YouTubers who are all about exploring magic and the connection that we have with spiritual forces through witchcraft and through paranormal events.

And so I guess there are thousands of young people, she's telling me, and I was talking to her about this, she's one of them, who do not believe in the existence of God, but practice the existence of evil spirits.

Very fascinating. And she shared with me of a personal friend in particular who opened the door through witchcraft to some dark spiritual forces in her lives a number of years ago, and now she lives in constant fear that evil spirits are following her and that the fate of her life is in their hands. It was an astonishing moment. I was able to tell her about one of the unique aspects of Jesus' ministry, and it was his power over these evil spirits. It just said Jesus had a way of saying one word and they would flee, and people would be set free.

Nobody else could do that. She wasn't convinced. But I thought it was worth telling her the good news. See, Luke tells us in verses 11 to 12 that Paul had this power too in the name of Jesus.

[ 13 : 50 ] And then in verse 13, that there were some itinerant Jewish exorcists who sought to harness this power as well, invoking the name of Jesus over evil spirits, only it backfires on them. They are overpowered by that which they seek to control.

And isn't that so often the case in our lives? We feel overpowered by that which we seek to control. And nowhere more so than in the spiritual realm.

And so Luke juxtaposes the seven sons of Sceva, so-called, with those who are burning their magic books in a massive heap.

The seven sons of Sceva look to the name of Jesus to provide them with magical power, where those who are burning their books look to the name of Jesus to liberate them from slavery to magic.

One looks for a new power to live an old way of life, and the other revokes and refuses the old way of life in order to worship a new person.

[ 14 : 54 ] So what's the issue at stake here? I think Luke wants to highlight for us our tendency and propensity to disconnect the use of Jesus' power and commitment to Jesus' person.

The use of Jesus' power and commitment to Jesus' person. I think we see this in verse 13, by the way in which the sons of Sceva invoke the name of Jesus over the evil spirits.

They say, I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul preaches. Notice the distance name. Not the Jesus they personally proclaim or believe or know, but the Jesus that Paul preaches.

And then the response of the evil spirit is also interesting in this regard, because the evil spirit does not recognize the sons of Sceva as it recognizes Paul and Jesus. And we see this theme throughout the Gospels that when the evil spirits or a demon-possessed person come into contact with Jesus, the evil spirits know right away that it's the Son of God.

We've just been in the Gospel of Mark where the evil spirits are the first one to get this. They know who Jesus is, but part of the purity of evil is having open eyes about who Jesus is, and yet doing everything in their power to resist him and undermine him.

[ 16 : 11 ] That's what's evil about the evil spirits. But notice, they do not know who the sons of Sceva are. And if they were connected with Jesus, they would know who they are.

So the implication is, these are people who seek to use the name of Jesus, to use the power of Christ without being committed to the person of Christ and belonging to his name.

Of this, evil spirits are not afraid. This is a very dangerous place to be in life. I want to pause here for a moment, because wanting what Christ can give without wanting Christ himself is a very dangerous place to be in life.

I'm afraid that many Christians, especially ministers like myself, face this temptation very acutely. Wanting the power to heal without commitment to the healer.

Wanting the ability to provide without commitment to the provider. Wanting to comfort without commitment to the comforter. Wanting spiritual gifts in abundance without commitment to the giver.

[ 17 : 24 ] Wanting creativity without commitment to the creator. See, Luke gives us here this powerful image of the gospel taking root among the superstitious of the city of Ephesus.

It's not people with charisma and spiritual gifts that bind the evil spirits and wow the crowds. It's people who stand before the ash heap of their sins, confessing and extolling the name of Jesus Christ.

In this way, Luke tells us in verse 20, the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily. And this is where things begin to get a little dicey in the city.

It raises this question, what is it that actually turns our cities upside down and causes people to pay attention? I think we think it's miracles and signs and wonders. Here it's repentance and worship.

And this is when the gospel comes into direct confrontation, not simply with the religious and the superstitious, but with the idolatrous. Verses 21 to 41. See, the city of Ephesus is now in a frenzy.

[ 18 : 38 ] People are feeling the economic impact of the gospel. And a couple weeks ago, I talked about in chapter 16 in Philippi, this is what causes cities to really get in an uproar, is when their pocketbooks are affected.

Because in a broken world, idolatry often undergirds significant portions of our economy.

Illustration, classic illustration, is the existence of the transatlantic slave trade for many centuries.

Britain and America refused to submit to the call of Christ to love their African brothers and sisters and neighbors. For the simple reason that it made them money and they profited from sin.

I think racism was definitely fueled by Darwinian ideology and by bad theology, but racism was especially fueled by the economy. It was the idol of money that propped up the chains of slavery for so long.

They knew. If we let go of this, we let go of a lot of profit. And I think there's lots of contemporary examples that we could probably point to. We could probably point to the pornography industry and how people are gaining a profit after...

[ 19 : 52 ] Whoa. People are gaining a profit over people idolizing sex and pleasure. It's destroying lives, yet there's money at stake.

We could probably think of the wellness and cosmetic industry. It's not all bad, but there are portions of it where people are profiting over people's idolization of the body and beauty. We could probably think of the computer industry.

Now, this is not all bad, but there are people who are profiting off people's idolization of control and efficiency. And yet, pornography has not made our cities more satisfied.

Cosmetics have not made our cities feel more healthy and peaceful. And computers have not made our cities feel more secure and less hurried. So the idols that we have in our lives have a way of tapping into our deepest desires and insecurities while others make money off it.

And when the gospel starts to mess with that, things get dicey. Because when Christ dethrones our idols, he messes with the economy.

[ 21 : 06 ] We saw this in Ephesus. Artemis of the Ephesians was the goddess of fertility. Human desire for beauty, health, sexual intimacy, and family were all wrapped up into her.

And so she had three festivals a year to support her. And one of the seven major wonders of the ancient world was her temple. It was four times larger than the Parthenon in Athens.

And people would plan their weddings to coincide with her festivals or their engagements. So often at her festivals, the married couple and the wedding party would process through the city singing hymns, great is Artemis of the Ephesians, and carrying little statues or figurines of her made by silversmiths.

Made in her image. And they were hoping that as they worshipped and as they carried her graven image, that the newly married couple would receive all the blessings that they hoped that life could offer them.

Makes me ponder afresh Paul's opening line in the letters to the Ephesians. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing.

[ 22 : 20 ] And so these figurines that were made by the silversmiths, Demetrius being one of them, they benefited financially from the people's idolatry. And we all know that the second something becomes a part of the wedding industry, the prices go up a lot.

There's one for our brain, yeah. I mean, if I want to buy a bouquet of flowers for my wife, it's like, okay, that would be \$25. If all of a sudden it's like, this is a bouquet of flowers for the wedding, that's \$250, please. But the main point here is that in a broken world, idolatry can undergird the economy in significant ways.

And when Christ shakes those idols, he will also shake us internally because the economy is often connected to our sense of security.

And we shouldn't really be surprised because it was Jesus himself who said, you cannot serve God in money. for either you will hate the one and you will love the other or you will despise the one or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other and then directly after saying that, he says, therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life.

So for Jesus, our love of money and our sense of insecurity are often connected. And that's why the city of Ephesus is in an uproar, gathering, rioting, causing confusion, chanting to Artemis, making false accusations because the heart will seek to protect that which it truly loves.

[ 23 : 48 ] And this is the major question undergirding the riots in our cities. Who or what is our deepest source of security? An idol is simply anything that we love more than Christ, that we trust more consistently than Christ or desire or fear or look to for our security more than Christ.

And so it's only the name of Christ that can shake us from those idols and secure our hearts in a fresh way. I have said these things to you, said Jesus, the night before his betrayal and death, that in me you have peace.

In the world you will have trouble and tribulation. But take heart, I have overcome the world. And so, my brothers and sisters, I want to return to where I started, which is gospel ministry in the city gets messy.

And I think one of the questions that is constantly posed to us is how do we stay faithful and hopeful in that mess? How do we stay faithful to the gospel and hopeful in life and ministry when things get messy?

And it brings us back to where we began, the name of Jesus. It strikes me that just a few years later when Paul wrote his letter to the Ephesians, he tells them that this is the name that is above all names, this is the name that is above all the principalities and powers, and when he prays for them, he prays that Christ might dwell in their hearts through faith so that they may know the surpassing love of Christ in their lives.

[ 25 : 37 ] and then a few decades later when Jesus speaks to John on the island of Patmos in Revelation chapter 2 and gives him a message for the church in Ephesus, he says this to them.

He says, I know your works and your toil. You have great theology. You've worked really hard. You've been super faithful in ministry. You have endured for my name. Actually uses that language. But then he says, this one thing I have against you. you have forsaken your first love. And so I think there is this way in the way that God speaks to Ephesus in their continuing life together as the gospel continues to take root that he wants to say to the church, do you know the love of Christ for you?

Do you know the love of Christ for you? Because when life gets messy and hard and difficult and there are riots and there are chaos, the only thing that can soften stubborn hearts is the love of Christ.

The only thing that can quell fearful hearts is the love of Christ. And the only thing that can bring peace to angry hearts is the love of Christ.

[ 26 : 53 ] It's interesting that the ancient world that was a world of magic had no place for love. It just had a place for spells and spiritual manipulation and control.

No place for love. And in the modern world we look at that magic world and go, man, they were really ignorant of how the world really works. And sometimes we can swing the pendulum all the way to a form of naturalism or deism where God has gotten the world clicking like a clock and then he's left it on its own.

But that's also a world devoid of love. And what we see here is that in the Christian faith when we come to the name of Jesus we discover the one who loves us and who invites us to love him.

And that is deeper and greater than any power, any money, any other source of security that we can possibly have in this world. And so my brothers and sisters, I speak these things to you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen. Amen.