

God's Mighty Word

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 28 February 2010

Preacher: The Venerable Daniel Gifford

[0 : 00] It will be helpful if you turn to page 131. We're looking at Acts 19, continuing on in this great series of how God spreads His Word throughout the world, how the fire of God's Word spreads and transforms people's lives.

And it is very exciting to be going through this. It's as exciting, more exciting even than the Olympics. The thing I'm thinking is there's maybe some of you here who are going to be watching a game later today.

Terry told me that next 11 a.m. service my sermon has to be three minutes long so we can catch the game. But God's Word will out-compete the Olympics, I think.

The thing that's striking about the Olympics is that it is something that is a once-in-a-lifetime kind of thing. That's what people are all saying. And it's a wonderful expression of people celebrating things that are good in humanity and so forth.

But the thing that's striking about the Olympics is that with all these people from all over the place, there are many who God has chosen, as I said last week, to know Him.

[1 : 26] And that, of course, is the once-in-a-lifetime, the greatest thing that can happen to a person is that they are transformed by the power of God's Word. And that's what this reading is about today.

It is about the transforming power of God's Word. In the Olympics downtown, there was hundreds of thousands of people. And as I walked down there last week, I saw lots of people passing out leaflets of all types, whether they were Scientologists or advertisers.

There was even evangelistic atheists down there as well who were fairly aggressive. And there were also, thankfully, many Christians handing out gospel pamphlets.

And our own Edie Rittinger was one of those. She was a street evangelist this past week. You should ask her about her experiences. Because God, I think, worked in a powerful way.

Now, the interesting thing about these pamphlets that were handed out is that I couldn't tell from receiving them what they were, whether they were Christian or not. They all kind of looked the same.

[2 : 31] They were trying to grab attention. And they asked about important questions in life, in a sense. They tried to reach what people's felt needs were. It's only after you started reading that the difference became clear, of course.

Because the pamphlets that accurately taught God's Word were pamphlets that actually could lead people to the living God. And all of the other leaflets, of course, do not and cannot and don't try to even.

In fact, when people come to believe in the pure Word of God that are contained in those leaflets or in the conversations of people like Edie downtown, God overcomes any obstacles in that person's life.

When they believe those words, there is a once-in-a-lifetime change. They are changed forever. So, you see in these ordinary pamphlets, the one big difference is the Word of God and its power to transform.

Now, as we look in Acts 19, Luke, the writer, is really struck by the power of God's Word to do this. To see the power of God's Word in people as they hear his Gospel.

[3 : 43] And we know this because in verse 20, he says in a wonderful summary, the Word of the Lord grew and prevailed mightily. That's what chapter 19 is about and that's what actually the whole book of Acts is about.

The Word of the Lord growing and prevailing mightily. And the reason that Luke is particularly struck by this in this passage today, I think, is because he's writing about Paul in two cities.

Both cities are centers of power. Last week, we talked about Corinth, the financial center in the Roman Empire. And then today, we are in Ephesus, the religious center of all of the empire as well.

And what we see in these powerful centers in both of these cities is how God's Word prevails. And so, in this chapter, Luke shows us that even though Ephesus is a center of worship, of idol worship, it actually becomes a base for Christianity to spread throughout the world.

And I think this passage is very helpful for it because what it does is it strengthens our confidence in God's Word. Lots of things that happen in our life try to erode that confidence.

[4 : 55] But this passage is wonderful because it shows us how powerful God works through it and that the Holy Spirit transforms lives in His Word.

So, I want to look just at three aspects of God's Word that shines out in the city of Ephesus. Just three aspects for you to take away with you. And it really unifies this whole section.

The first thing we see is that God's Word is pure. It is pure. And we see God keeping His Word pure a number of times. Look back at chapter 18.

I'm just going to quickly go back there. So, on 131, starting in verse 22, Paul takes to secure this route to Ephesus. So, he goes down to Jerusalem and then back to Antioch through present-day Turkey and back to Ephesus.

It's thousands of miles. And you wonder, why did Luke include that journey? Well, one of the reasons is that Paul goes to Jerusalem.

[6 : 04] And what it says in 1822 is that he went up and greeted the church from Caesarea. Now, that can only mean he goes up to Jerusalem. And the reason he goes to Jerusalem is to meet with the apostles, to talk to the first church of Christianity, and really to compare notes with them.

Am I preaching the same gospel that Jesus gave? Are we preaching the pure Word of God together? He goes there so he has close contact with that church, and he has accountability as well.

Paul is making sure that both are clearly teaching and preaching the same pure gospel. And there is humility here. There is a deep commitment to guard the gospel.

And then if you just go down to 24, we see a Jew named Apollos who is very eloquent. He is a powerful speaker. He is incredible to listen to. And he teaches accurately about Jesus.

But it is not quite sufficient. He only knows the baptism of John. And so when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside. And it says here in God's Word that they explained to him the way of God more accurately.

[7 : 20] And then they send him on to Corinth with a letter of reference as well. Now, this is a great gift to the church because Priscilla and Aquila are ensuring that this man with incredible speaking gifts is going to preach only the pure Word of God.

The whole teaching, the whole will, the whole counsel of God to those people in Corinth. It is a work to make sure God's Word is pure.

And then finally, I want you to notice our own chapter 19 here. The first seven verses are very interesting because the first people that Paul meets in Ephesus are disciples.

But they aren't disciples of Jesus Christ. They are disciples of John the Baptist. And he asks them questions to see what they know of the Gospel. He wants to see whether they know the pure Gospel of Christ.

And he finds out that they are not Christians. They haven't even heard of the Holy Spirit that comes through belief in Jesus. And they only know about John's baptism, not Jesus' baptism.

[8 : 25] And so Paul says in verse 4, John baptized with a baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him. That is Jesus.

And I want you to know that between verse 4 and 5, there's likely a fair amount of time that takes place. Because, of course, Paul has to explain to them who Jesus is, what he has come to do, what his grace is all about, and how he fulfills all the promises of the Bible.

And so that verse tips us off that this takes place. He preaches the pure Word of God to them. And these men, these disciples of John the Baptist, are convinced, and they are baptized in the very next verse.

And then what we see happen is that Paul lays his hands on them, and the Holy Spirit comes on them, and they began speaking in tongues. And they are prophesying as well. Does that sound familiar?

It's Pentecost. It's just like the first day of Pentecost. Now, I need you to know that this is about the Holy Spirit as at Pentecost, coming upon people as they first believe.

[9 : 34] It's not teaching that you receive the Holy Spirit sometime after you believe in the risen Lord Jesus. It is a teaching that says that the Holy Spirit comes upon you as you believe in the Lord Jesus.

And Luke is showing us that this is exactly what happened when Peter explained the good news to Cornelius and his friends for the first time as well. It shows to us that both Peter and Paul are preaching the same powerful and pure gospel.

And as we read this chapter, it's important for us to know that the amazing signs and miracles that Paul and Peter perform and take place throughout the book of Acts, first, they take place to point to the fact that Paul's and Peter's words are Jesus' true and pure words and that those words save people, just as Jesus healed and saved.

But secondly, those miracles are extraordinary. That's what verse 11 tells us. And literally that means it is not commonly occurring, not even in Paul and Peter's ministry.

And you see an example of this in verse 12 where people touch things that Paul was wearing, his sweaty headbands, the apron that he's using for his leather working, and they are healed.

[10 : 52] Now that's the same kind of extraordinary miracle that happens through Peter and the apostles in chapter 5, where even the shadow of Peter causes healing. There's a purpose for those miracles.

They are miracles that happen in Jesus' own ministry, and they are miracles that point to the fact that they have the authority to speak God's pure word, and that that is what they are speaking.

It's important for us to know throughout the book of Acts that there are some things in Acts that happen that are descriptive, but not necessarily prescriptive.

In other words, they describe things that happen, but they don't prescribe that this is what happens as a rule in the life of the church. And this is certainly one of those things.

God has a unique purpose for these uncommon miracles. They show that Paul's words were the true gospel of Jesus, that he is truly an apostle of Jesus, and he has the authority to write part of the Bible.

[11 : 55] And this is telling us, Luke is teaching us, that it's very important that all that we do as a church should be devoted to the pure word of God. The gospel of Jesus that was handed down through these apostles, and that we read in church.

There is constant pressure in our society to compromise and leave out parts of the Bible which don't fit in with its present values. And I think it's great that the BCP recognizes this when it ordains clergy.

It asks great questions. And here's two of them. It says to them, the bishop says to them, Are you determined out of the scriptures to instruct the people committed to your charge and to teach nothing but that which you shall be persuaded may be concluded and proved by scripture?

And you say, I am so persuaded and have so determined by God's grace? And then we're asked, Will you be ready with all faithful diligence to banish and drive away all erroneous and strange doctrines of God's word?

That's a great line. And do you know the Anglican church would be on fire if we all followed through with this as clergy? Banishing strange and erroneous doctrines.

[13 : 11] These are questions that Paul would have loved because they reflect his commitment to preach only the pure word of God. And there's reason for his concern.

Without that purity of teaching, you are actually led away from God. You are kept from coming close to Him. You are kept from His transforming grace.

Now I think an image of the Olympics is helpful for us here. One of the news stories about the Olympics is that people were very much drawn to the cauldron downtown of this huge Olympic flame.

But the problem, the criticism early on, was that there was a chain-link fence that kept people from seeing that cauldron clearly. And it actually kept people away. People couldn't take pictures.

And so Van Ock worked very hard to cut holes in the fence, make sure you could go up on a roof and look down and get a clear view of the flame. It's a lasting image that we have.

[14 : 11] I know that because our neighbors have Olympic parties watching hockey games all the time. They have a patio torch in their front yard as part of their decoration, and it has a chicken wire around the outside of it.

And most people got it, too. And I want to tell you that impure doctrine and diluting the Word of God is like a fence that keeps us away from seeing the living Lord Jesus.

It keeps us from knowing the power of God in your life. It keeps us from drawing close to God Almighty. You know, Augustine understood that the Word of God was like a fire.

Well, Jeremiah did as well. And he said this. He said, The Holy Spirit's role is to make us long passionately for what the Gospel promises. So he says, Even now the fire is burning.

The heat of the Word is on. The fierce glow of the Holy Spirit. And that heat belongs to the Holy Spirit, we are told by Paul. So for the time being, Treat the Scripture of God as the face of God.

[15 : 17] Melt in front of it, under the heat of the Word. When the tears begin to flow, don't you feel yourself rather like wax beginning to drip and flow down as if in tears.

You see, Augustine is teaching us that when God's Word is pure, the Holy Spirit works so powerfully that it brings you into the presence of the living God. The Word of God is like a fire, a pure fire, where we are affected, we are changed and transformed by it.

And that pure Word brings us close to Jesus. So close that He comes into the depths of our hearts and our minds. It's a living Word that is very, very personal.

And that's the second thing about God's Word. It is personal. And I want you to look at verse 13 and following. This is a very unusual event that takes place.

There were exorcists who were likely very involved in some of the magic and pagan practices and they tried to copy what God was doing through Paul. So in the name of Jesus, they tried to get rid of demons.

[16 : 24] But that counterfeit ministry is revealed as those evil spirits turn on Him, on them, the seven sons of Sceva, and they beat them and they flee into the streets without any clothes.

And of course, that makes all the 6 o'clock news in Ephesus. Everybody hears about it. It's an extraordinary thing. And the result is that the personal nature of God's Word is actually revealed because the living God clearly revealed the deceit in the hearts of those to the citizens of Ephesus.

The Bible says that the fear fell upon the residents of Ephesus. And the name of the Lord Jesus, which Paul was preaching, was extolled.

It was honored, magnified. So what happened in that incredible scene is that what Paul had been teaching about Jesus was confirmed, that He is the living Lord.

And the result shows the personal nature of God's Word. Look at verse 18. Now this is an amazing verse. It says, Many also of those who were now believers came, confessing and divulging their practices.

[17 : 35] And a number of those who 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 50,000 pieces of silver.

Each piece of silver, by the way, is a day's wage. Now this is a beautiful picture of God's Word bringing deep repentance and revealing what to turn away from.

God showed these people what they were slaves to. And as they believed His Word, God revealed secret things in their hearts that were keeping these Christians away from true freedom in Him.

This is what we prayed for at the beginning of our service, that God would grant us true repentance and His Holy Spirit. Magic was very hard to let go of. It was something that was ingrained in their culture.

We may not be able to understand this, but magic was something that brought you into favor with God. It could protect you and your family. It could bring you success and wealth. It would bring healing of sickness, protection from evil.

[18 : 41] Not only that, but these magic books were very, very expensive. Then there was a real sense of security and fulfillment that they were giving up. And they could only give it up because God looked into their hearts and spoke to them personally through God's Word, through the Gospel that Paul taught.

And what this teaches about the power of God's Word is important for us because the primary way that the Holy Spirit works is through His Word. And what He does is He speaks to us directly and personally.

It is as though Jesus is writing a letter to you as you read His Word. He knows your heart and He speaks to you by His Holy Spirit as you read.

That's the intention of God's Word. He tells you of His love and grace that He lavishes on you and the promises that are yours. And He also tells you personally of the costly things He wants you to give up in order to be free to follow Him.

The picture of the bonfire is a picture of our own lives as a response to the Gospel. And you really get a sense that in that fire in Ephesus it's like a celebration of freedom.

[19 : 57] It's a big Olympic party. They were able to give up those things which had been of great value to them but had enslaved them because of the reality of Jesus in their lives.

They were set free. And we are, whether you know it or not, because of all our Olympics, we are in the season of Lent. And this is a time when we focus on repentance and self-examination and the reading of God's Word.

All of these are part of that scene of repentance in Ephesus. And so this Lent, this chapter is giving us an opportunity. Let God's Word speak to you.

What are those things that are hidden obstacles in your life to following Jesus? What is God revealing to you about yourself through His Word that's personally addressed to you?

He gives you power by His Holy Spirit to repent and to give up even those things that are of great value to you. God's Word is a personal Word and He does that in order to bring you into a closer, more free relationship with Him.

[21 : 01] And I want to close this sermon by giving the third thing that Luke tells us about God's Word. Immediately after that incredible bonfire, verse 20 comes to us again.

The Word of the Lord grew and prevailed mightily. That's the theme of Acts. God's Word prevails. It prevails over violent persecution, over unbelief, over personal hidden sin, over powerful governments, over false teaching, and over powerful spiritual forces that are around in the city.

And one of the things I puzzled over as I read this passage, figuring out how to preach it, is why does Luke spend so much time writing about the riot in Ephesus in verses 21 through 41?

You know, Paul doesn't hardly come into that at all. And Luke spends an awful lot of time on it. And the best thing that I read, and I think the thing that makes sense, is that the point that Luke is doing is he's showing us that Christ challenges and is a threat to the greatest pagan religion of the Roman Empire.

And that religion had to do with Artemis. Artemis had, goddess Artemis had 33 worship sites from Syria to Spain. It went across the whole Roman Empire.

[22 : 23] And the greatest worship site was in Ephesus. They had a temple to Artemis that was four times as big as the Parthenon in Athens.

It was massive. It was one of the seven wonders of the world. And engravings that have been found by archaeologists say that this goddess was seen as the god who answers prayer.

She is acclaimed as the savior and has lordship over supernatural powers, including demons and powers of faith and stars. She defined the city and she was the city's pride.

It was a patriotism that rivaled the patriotism of Canadians when they think of hockey. Ephesus prided itself as being the religious center of the empire. But Demetrius tells us in verse 25, you see and hear that not only at Ephesus but also throughout all Asia, Paul has persuaded and he's turned away a considerable company of people saying that God made with hands are not gods.

He's saying, this guy's affecting us economically. The gospel of Jesus Christ is such a threat that these people started a riot. Now what Demetrius is telling us, even though he's not a Christian, is that Jesus prevails over the spiritual forces of Ephesus.

[23 : 46] People are coming to him for their salvation. They are believing Jesus is the Lord. They are placing their future in his hands and they are serving him alone. It is a transformation.

And it all happens because back in verse 9, Paul preached and he taught every day in this hall of Tyrannus, this lecture hall. He probably did it for five hours a day by the way, during the siesta time, 11 to 4.

People heard God's word. It says Paul persuaded people through it and he argued and that's where the transformation came from. And it was not only in Ephesus but throughout the province that the church grew.

Now there's nothing impressive about Paul or the church or the Christians who made up the church. There's no power. There's not much money but yet the word of God prevails because simply Paul takes the time to talk about Jesus from the Bible and the implication of Jesus in their lives as well.

And he said what he did. He said in the Corinthians, he said, I decided to know nothing among you except for Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and fear and much trembling and my speech, my message were not plausible words of wisdom but, he says, it was a demonstration of the spirit and of power that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

[25 : 14] So as we go away from this passage, what we see here is that the word of God that we have in front of you right now is also God's power. Acts 19 tells us that God's word is personal, that it is pure and that it prevails.

It prevails over obstacles to God in our lives, over secrets that keep us from God, over our weakness and reluctance. It prevails over all that is powerful in this world.

And that's why the prophet Isaiah tells us, surely the people are grass, the grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.

May God grant us such confidence in his word that we expect Jesus to personally speak to us, to fill us with his presence and to change us through that word.

Amen. So let us pray.

[26 : 27] So the word of the Lord grew and prevailed mightily. let us just reflect on that growth and prevailing first in our own lives and paying particular attention as this chapter directs us to, to the power of the Holy Spirit in growth and in the godliness and holiness of Christ prevailing.

Let us just pray for ourselves. Let's pray too for the growth and prevailing of the word of the Lord in this parish.

Let us pray that not just singly but collectively we may be working and praying and trusting for that growth.

Let us pray. Lord in your mercy.

Let us now think of mission. This great book of Acts is a missionary book.

[28 : 22] Let us begin by thinking of the overseas missions of our congregation especially in Egypt in Jerusalem and also of our mission interest with our friends in the Upper Shire in Malawi and the new bishop there.

Let us pray. Let us pray. Let us pray. Let us pray. Let us pray too in Canada for the continuing work of Annick and for the many new church plants that have been placed in faith and through hard work in many parts of Canada.

Let us pray this morning for those new church plants. Let us pray. Let us pray. Let us pray. Let us pray. Let us pray. Let us pray. Let us pray. Let us pray. Let us pray.

the work that is continuing even today as Christians reach out in many different ways to show the love and the truth of the gospel to the many residents of Vancouver and beyond who are attending events today.

Let us pray for those outreach activities. Let us pray. Let us pray. Lord, in your mercy, we now cast our thoughts to the world for which Jesus died.

[31 : 06] We think of three areas in particular. We think first of Chile and the extraordinary strength of the earthquake that has brought devastation to Chile.

Let us pray for Chile. Chile Let's continue to pray too for Haiti as the rains arrive and the difficulties of living rough, living in tense cities, living without adequate food now become even more intense.

Let's pray too for Dave Carter from this congregation and his work in Port-au-Prince. Amen.

And lastly, let's continue to pray for Afghanistan. As we pray for our troops, let us also remember the civilians who are frequently caught between firing from both sides and our victims of it.

Let's pray for the families of those civilians that were killed this week. Lord, in your mercy.

[33 : 29] Lastly, let's bring before the Lord the needs of this parish. And I would begin firstly with praying specifically for the Stevenson family and the medical challenges, the profound difficulties that that family faces.

we pray for them this week as Ken and Gail meet with their family in Qualicum. We pray for this poignant occasion and we pray for clarity from Ken and Gail as they speak of the hope which they have for the future.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Let's bring before the Lord also those known to us in this parish who have special needs, health needs, poverty needs, loneliness needs.

Lord, in your mercy.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.