

The Safest Place

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[0:00] Turn with me to Acts chapter 19. Acts chapter 19. I'm going to do what I sometimes do and just work my way through this chapter.

See how far we get. We'll possibly complete the chapter. I don't know. But the chapter is about Paul and his visit in Ephesus. Ephesus was in Asia Minor.

And this is really where you have to have a map with you. This is really where PowerPoint would, one of the only occasions when PowerPoint would assist, I think, in a sermon where you would be able to look at a map.

In fact, one of the things I wanted to do in one of our hall prayer meetings was to follow Paul using a map in his three journeys. We'll probably do that, I hope, after the summer at some point.

Because it is fascinating. It's absolutely fascinating to try and follow. But in any case, we don't need that tonight. Ephesus is in modern Turkey.

[1:09] It's near the coast, not quite on the coast. But if you look at, in fact, I'm going to set some of the young people a challenge to find for me where the modern equivalent of Ephesus is.

I wonder if you'll be able to do that. Find for me where modern, the modern city or town which is closest to Ephesus. Some of the adults will know that.

In fact, it would be really interesting to look it up on Google Earth. If you've got Google Earth, and if you don't, then you should have. Then it would be fascinating to find where Ephesus is in your Bible map and to find where the modern equivalent is today in Turkey.

I want to ask you to find something else for me in a wee minute's time. And it's not because I know. I actually, I have to confess, I don't quite know myself. I didn't really have time to look it up.

It was one of these things that I did try to do at the last moment, but didn't quite do it. And so if you wouldn't mind you doing that, try and find out where Ephesus is.

[2:19] So this gives an account of two years that Paul spent in Ephesus. The first thing he did was to find disciples. And the question that he put to these disciples was, did you, verse 2, receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?

Now here's one of these passages that has caused confusion and has caused conflict between Christians of different backgrounds. Because those who believe that the baptism of the Spirit, some Christians believe that the baptism of the Spirit is something that we should be praying for and something that we should wait for that comes after a person is converted.

You find that in Pentecostal circles, for example, and charismatic circles. You'll find that these people believe that, that they believe in the baptism of the Spirit. And this is an experience which they believe gives them a sense of assurance.

And it also produces the gifts of the Spirit, which very often they believe to be speaking in tongues. I'm not going to go into that in any detail.

I've done this before. But just to confine ourselves to the fact that that's what some Christians believe. And they use this passage as a backup for this position that they take.

[3 : 42] And especially in the authorized version, where the authorized version puts the question, did you receive the Holy Spirit after you believed?

And they'll say, well, there's your proof. There's your proof. That the Holy Spirit comes on and baptizes Christians afterwards. At some point, it might be a year afterwards. It might be five years afterwards.

It might be ten years afterwards. And what we need to do, once you're converted, you need to pray that God will at some point come to you in great power and lift you to the higher level in your Christian life by baptizing you with the Spirit.

And they say, this is one of the verses which is a proof to us that baptism of the Spirit comes afterwards. It usually goes to the authorized version. But the word after in the authorized version is misleading.

And it actually should be as it is here. When you believe. Now, I'm not going to spend the whole of the time this evening proving this.

[4 : 41] But I believe the Bible never, the New Testament does not show that the baptism of the Spirit is an experience that comes after we are converted.

I believe in the baptism of the Spirit. I believe that happens when a person comes to faith in Jesus. And I think it's important to work that out by reading the New Testament for ourselves.

Because there's a lot of confusion about this whole thing. Some of you might not agree with me. But I'm not, as I say, I'm not going to spend time on this. But in any case, you might come back at me and say, well, here were Christians.

Here were people who were believers. They were disciples. And they weren't baptized with the Spirit. So, therefore, it's possible to be a disciple and not to be baptized in the Spirit.

But remember that this whole period was an unusual period. In that here was the gospel being introduced. The church was being inaugurated.

[5 : 47] The church was in its infancy. Infancy. And just like anything in its infancy has to be nurtured and has to be spoon-fed, if you like. Here was a group of Christians that needed to be spoon-fed.

And it's not right to go to a group of Christians like this and say, aha, this is what we should expect. It's not right. There are some areas in the New Testament, and they show us what was happening at the very beginning of the church.

And it's by no means something that we need to take as normative for the church in our day and our generation. Of course, this raises a whole lot of other questions.

I know many, many questions. And it's interesting to be able to discuss these questions like, what are these things that were confined to this particular period? We're going to see in a few moments' time that God was doing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul.

I believe that that too was confined, that extraordinariness. I'm not saying that God can't do strange things and unusual things. I'm not saying that he doesn't do strange sometimes.

[6 : 52] Every so often he can do strange things. I believe that. But not to the extent he was doing it here, where there was widespread healing. That was confined to the infancy of the church, to the inauguration of the church.

We'll come on to that in a few moments' time. But the important thing is, I think, to realize that these people had not come to a full knowledge of the gospel.

They had somehow or other, it's quite incredible really, somehow or other they had come into contact with the teaching of John the Baptist, who of course was the forerunner of Jesus himself.

And somehow or other, these people had begun to believe. They had repented. Remember that John had preached the gospel of... There were two parts to John's message.

First of all, he was able to show the people how wrong they were and how sinful they were and how they needed to turn away from their sins. But the second element in John's message was always that they must look to the one who was to come, which was Jesus Christ.

[7 : 59] Now, somehow or other, these people had come into contact with John's message and they had been baptized with John's baptism, which means that they had repented of their sins.

But they didn't know what they were repenting to. They didn't know what belief they were entering into, so they needed to hear the gospel. They needed to hear the gospel in all its completeness and in all its fullness.

And so there was confusion amongst these disciples. And it's not right for us to go with all our knowledge and say, Ah, here we're Christians. We don't know if they were Christians. In fact, there's every indication to suggest that they weren't fully Christians.

They hadn't come to that faith in Jesus Christ, that they were able to come through hearing the gospel. And that's what happened. Paul went in and he supplied the missing link.

He put the last piece of the jigsaw into place. And you can imagine the joy and the elation and the amazement amongst those disciples. They must have felt all along, There's something not right here.

[9 : 04] There's something not right. We believe in God the Father. We believe in the one God. We believe that we are sinners. We believe in the grace and the mercy of God.

And yet we don't know how it all comes together. Well, it all comes together in Jesus Christ. And perhaps, you know, if I can stop here for a moment, perhaps there's some people here tonight and that's the position you're in.

You believe in God. You believe you're a sinner. And yet there's something missing. And maybe you don't even quite know what it is. How does it all come together? How can you come to that relationship with God in which you will be a new person?

And the answer to that is always and only in Jesus Christ. There's only one way. I am the way, the truth, and the life, says Jesus. No one comes to the Father but by me.

And so as soon as Paul preached, he shared with them what they needed to know. Then everything fell into place. And the Holy Spirit on that moment came upon them all just the same way as the Holy Spirit had come on the day of Pentecost to the disciples and to all the church that were gathered there and empowered them and filled them with the Holy Spirit and sent them on their way rejoicing.

[10 : 23] And they began to speak in tongues, which was, I believe, again, I don't want to be controversial, but I fully believe that tongue speaking was a feature of the early, the church, again, in its infancy.

But it was a demonstration of God's power, an amazing demonstration of the peculiar, particular power of God. Verse 8.

He entered the synagogue, as he very often did. Paul, remember, was a student of Gamaliel, the great teacher, the great Jewish teacher. And so it was natural for him to go into the synagogue.

He was a Jew himself. He was a Pharisee himself. So it was natural for him to go into the synagogue. He spoke their language, as it were, their religious language. And for three months he spoke, he reasoned with them and persuading them about the kingdom of God.

But verse 9. But then, as so often happened, some of them became stubborn and continued in unbelief, speaking evil of the way before the congregation.

[11:23] You see, the gospel always has two effects on people. It draws some people into faith in Jesus Christ, but then sometimes it drives other people away.

They become hardened to the gospel. Please make sure tonight that you don't become hardened to the word of God, to the gospel. Please make sure that you're amongst those who come and who look to Jesus by faith and who come to a saving relationship with him.

Only Jesus can give you everlasting life. But sadly, look at what happens here in the synagogue. People who should have recognized Jesus, who should have known from their Old Testament that Jesus fulfilled everything that the Old Testament promised.

Yet, instead of believing in him, they walked away from him and they spoke evil of the way. At that, when Paul realized that his time was up in the synagogue, that nobody was listening to him any longer, he went away.

And he went to, in verse 9, he reasoned daily in the hall of Tyrannus. Now, Tyrannus, we don't quite know who Tyrannus was, and we don't know what kind of hall he had.

[12:41] But in any case, instead of preaching in the synagogue, he went into the hall of Tyrannus. But the interesting reading about this is quite, again, is quite fascinating. Tyrannus, of course, was a Greek.

We don't know whether he was a believer or not, whether he was a Christian or not. But he was obviously sympathetic, at least, to what Paul was doing. And he obviously allowed Paul, either for a rent, I don't know whether Paul paid a rent, for being able to use his hall or his classroom.

It was some kind of small, perhaps, theater or a lecture hall. Remember that there was a lot of philosophers in those days, and there was great emphasis on education. So it was some kind of school.

And the interesting thing is about Tyrannus, and here is a little amusing fact. The word Tyrannus means tyrant. Tyrant. And most people reckon that this was his nickname.

He was a teacher who was a bit of a tyrant, a bit of a bully, and they called him the tyrant. So it always amuses me how teachers here have a nickname. When my kids, they talk about their teachers, they never talk about them in their real names at all.

[13:50] They talk about them in their nicknames, and I'm certainly not going to start listing what these names are. But you all know, of course, in Stornoway, that that's part of our culture. It always has happened.

So here it is here, in Ephesus, that this guy has got the nickname Tyrannus, because he's a tyrant. They call him the tyrant. And he gave his hall to the apostle, his classroom.

And one of the texts, one of the texts, the New Testament text, tells us that that Paul rented this hall from 11 o'clock in the morning to 4 o'clock in the afternoon.

Now, this again, is a fascinating piece of information, because it means that while everybody else was having their siesta, which is what would happen during the hours of 11 o'clock and 4 o'clock, or sometimes during these hours, then there were some people who gave up on their siesta in order to hear the gospel.

And Paul gave up on his siesta in order to preach the gospel. You see, if we really are interested in where we are with God, then these things don't matter anymore, because everything else gets put to one side, isn't it?

[15:04] When we really start thinking seriously about our relationship with God, the things that don't matter are put to one side. And you know, when you're involved in preaching the gospel and sharing Christ, when you come to Christ, you know what you want as a number one priority is for others to come to Christ.

That's what Paul said. Paul said, woe is me if I do not preach the gospel. For Paul, there was simply no other way of life. And he spent his whole life just telling people.

And so, if these texts are right, then he would spend four hours, five hours, sharing with people.

Now, interestingly enough, and this is where it comes up to date with us. Interestingly enough, then, do you see what's happening here? Here is not the church anymore. Here is a kind of a secular place.

A secular place where people would come in and where Paul, it was a kind of neutral territory. And nowadays, that's a methodology that the church is finding is the most useful methodology for sharing the gospel in a neutral territory like what we do in the cabaret.

[16:20] When we say, anybody who's interested in finding out more over the Christian faith, come on a Tuesday night. And it's in a neutral territory so people don't feel the kind of intimidation.

Well, it shouldn't be intimidating, but for some people it might be. So, in this day and age, what we do, and this is entirely scriptural. That's what we're doing. We're not doing anything that is not here in the Bible.

Here is a neutral territory where all these people could come every day and Paul would answer their questions and they would ask all kinds of different things and as they asked and as Paul answered and as they got together, they would have a greater knowledge of who God was and who Jesus was and what he came to do.

And many of them came to faith in Jesus. Marvelous, isn't it? It's absolutely marvelous how the gospel spread. And verse 10 tells us for two years so that, this is, again it gets better, so that all the residents of Asia, the whole area of Asia heard the word of the Lord both Jews and Greeks.

I reckon he must have based himself in Ephesus and probably gone traveling to various different satellite wee towns round about where he would do exactly the same there.

[17:40] Either that or they would come maybe to a marketplace, maybe there was a marketplace in Ephesus and on market day they would all come in and they would find out that this man Paul was having this seminar in the lecture hall of Tyrannus and they would hear about it by word of mouth.

Remember that word of mouth was the only real way of communication. communication. They didn't have, of course, our information technology in those days.

It was just word of mouth and people would hear about these things that were going on. This was a, this was a, this was something that people went to. And so you would go along and you would try it out and you would go and see what it was all about and you would come in and you would, even if you came from an outlying town or whatever, the whole of the, isn't that two years, the whole of Asia heard the word of God.

Now that doesn't mean that everyone in Asia became Christians, but it meant that the word of God was spread so that people got to hear about it and as that happened, various churches were started along the way.

Now here's verse 11. It gets better, it gets even more extraordinary. God did extraordinary things by the hands of Paul so that even handkerchiefs, listen to this, even handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched his skin.

[19:04] Now a handkerchief was not this in this, in the Bible. A handkerchief was a kind of bandana that they would wear in those days because they sweated a lot.

You can imagine how in the hot sun they would sweat a lot and this was a kind of headband that men wore and what this word handkerchief means is it's a headband and if you took it off Paul's head and you touched someone who was sick, here we have their diseases left them and evil spirits came out of them.

I remember seven years ago I remember going to India and I went to this little this little village that no other white person had ever been to before or they had maybe passed through but they hadn't stayed there and it was one of the most extraordinary experiences in my whole life because in this wee village they had all turned to Jesus and it was a village that was a Christian village.

Now that didn't mean that every one of them was converted but on the whole instead of being a Hindu village they were a Christian village and you find that in some parts of India and so I was asked but I won't tell you the story but in any case the church was in its very very basic form.

This was literally literally going all the way back and on not on more than one occasion somebody would come to me and I remember one particular person and of course they were incredibly poor and this person came to me with a little bottle of oil and they said to me through an interpreter will you pray over this bottle of oil and touch it so that because my cow is sick and I want to be able to go back to my cow with this oil that you've touched and that you've prayed over and anoint my cow with this oil and I believe that the cow will be healed.

[21 : 10] Now that's a very difficult position to begin isn't it? What would you say to a person like that? What would you say? That's a very very interesting position isn't it? Because that person in all sincerity believes in what they're doing and he believes and yet so you can't you can't just turn your back on them you can't just refuse to speak to them and say oh well you don't know what you're talking about that's all very well for me to say that because I've been brought up in a Christian home and I know the Bible and I know all about the intricacies of reform theology and all the rest of it but this poor person his cow's going to die so what do you do?

Well I prayed but I didn't touch the oil and the reason is because if I had done that they would have elevated me to a position that I had no right to have they believed that because I'd come from the west I was some kind of apostle they asked me to ordain some of their elders I refused because again it was a kind of an apostolic thing now the point is that Paul was an apostle that's the whole point and what was happening here happened at this particular time to authenticate the beginning of the Christian church and here was God's way of stamping of placing his stamp of approval on the message that the apostle was bringing to the people of Ephesus by performing these extraordinary miracles and I put it to you again today the same is not the case today again

I'm not saying that God can't do extraordinary things I'm not saying that he doesn't from time to time I'm not saying don't pray for someone who's sick of course you pray for someone who's sick but please don't expect the same kind of phenomena that you have here this was tied to this particular era this beginning era in the Christian church so what's more it brought them into conflict with the very devil himself who was operating in Ephesus by way of the people who were making out that they were able to that they were able to exorcise there was of course the phenomenon of some who were possessed with demons and here we read evil spirits came out of them of course the same kind of situation occurred in the time of

Jesus where he was met with people who were possessed who were literally possessed by demons and he of course with his authority was able to command demons to leave but when the sons of a Jewish high priest named Skeva they thought that they would cash in on what Paul was doing it's a very dangerous thing to cash in on the gospel there's only one message in the gospel and you can't have the benefits of the gospel without the whole package you can't pick and choose what part of the gospel you happen to like whether it's eternal life or whether it's peace with God you can't pick and choose the gospel has to be taken as a whole and demands my soul my life my all but these men thought that they could cash in and add to their repertoire of spells because that's what they were they were magicians and there was a lot of superstition in those days even amongst the

Jewish people a lot of superstition just as there is in many parts of the world today but all of this turned very badly against them when they thought that they could use the name of Jesus to drive out the demon from a man who had extraordinary strength and he ended up beating up them all and sending them out that's what happens when we play around with the truth you can't muck about with God's truth it's either all or it's nothing and that was the point at which when that happened fear seemed to come on all of them and all of a sudden the power of their magic it just disappeared altogether under the power of God and what they had given their lives to the many many hundreds of people who had given their lives to superstition and occult practices all of a sudden it meant nothing to them anymore and they came and they brought their books here we go a number of those who had practiced magic arts brought their books together and burned them in the sight of everyone and they counted the value of them and found it came to 50,000 pieces of silver

[26 : 46] I count that as about 1.2 million pounds 1.2 million pounds up in smoke that's the effect of the gospel you see when you discover the value of the gospel everything else pales into insignificance you don't care what you burn if it claims your life then it has to go if it's been your God in the past it has to go you have to turn away that's what repentance means when you turn away from everything that's sinful because of the new life that Jesus gives you and these people they did it willingly they weren't forced to do it they weren't coerced to do it because God was working in their hearts and bringing them to the kind of change that and it looked as if things were going so well and so successfully in

Ephesus but like we find in so many of these places that Paul visited the success of the gospel was followed very quickly by danger and by conflict and here's what happened and what was happening was that paganism was so rife and particularly as it surrounded this god Artemis in the verses that followed Artemis was the god of the Ephesians and some of you who will be reading the av will read that the name is Diana that's the Latin name Artemis was actually the real Greek name as it's found in the ESV and she was a female god and her temple which is found today at Ephesus is one of the seven wonders of the world her figure which was a female figure surrounded by breasts which made her the god of fertility she attracted attention from all around but all that attention had disappeared and it was waning away and coupled to this there were things being sold little statues being sold silver statues or trinkets being sold all over

Ephesus now I guess people who were local to Ephesus would buy these and they would think there was some luck involved in them I guess that in some way they believed that as long as they possessed one of these little statuettes that somehow whatever goodness or benefit there was in believing in Artemis it would come to them and that home would be kept safe and they would have lots of children which is a big issue of course in those days and that infertility would not be an issue anymore and so on that's what superstition is all about but when the gospel came in these people realized we're wasting our time here there is only one God and God is not confined to a wee silver little statuette here you know it's amazing isn't it what you find superstition is all over the world when I go to Thailand I think I've shown you some of the photographs of the spirit houses outside people's homes little tiny spirit houses and they believe that if they keep one of these little things that all the spirits will be kept away from their homes imagine that they burn incense and they make offerings with vegetables and all that kind of stuff and you pass them by and you think how can these people believe in this well they do they do that's a fact that's the kind of world we live in and it's also the case that you pass on the road places that sell

Buddhas and they must make quite a lot of money out of people's superstition and you know if ever the gospel really took hold in a Buddhist country these traders would be the first to suffer because they would start losing their trade this is what happened to this man called Demetrius and Demetrius became extremely annoyed when he realised that his sales figures were going down through the floor and he gathered together his colleagues and the workmen in similar trades and he says it was a speech man you know that from this business we have our wealth it's interesting isn't it that's his priority now if he really was a devout believer in Artemis then Artemis would have come first he would have said you know that Artemis is our God but that wasn't his first priority the first thing he said was men you know that from this business we have our wealth you know that tells me a lot about the human heart a person and a person who refuses to believe in Jesus

Christ it is not because the gospel is illogical here was God proving with signs and miracles which you couldn't refute these miracles were done in full view of everyone and yet instead of someone like Demetrius saying the game's up I too have to become a Christian he becomes hard and he says I don't care what God is doing I don't care what miracles I'm witnessing what matters to me is my trade and see that's the old life and that's what really keeps people back from faith in Jesus Christ the old life which means too much to you doesn't it that's what's keeping you back it's not that the gospel is unbelievable and it's not that it's unreasonable it's just you love your old life too much and you feel you can't let it go that's what repentance is there's no negotiation it's either all or nothing you must let it go but what happened was

[33 : 06] Demetrius he gathered a whole crowd together and thousands and thousands of people gathered they came into the they came into the the theater in Ephesus now that wasn't the kind of theater that we talk about like the lander this was an outdoor theater that how that could cope with 25,000 people and apparently it's been excavated again since this time it's been excavated and apparently you can go and see it today now here's what I don't know and here's the challenge to some of the younger ones I would like to find that theater on Google Earth is it possible I don't know if it is see if you can find it for me see if you can find it for me maybe I'm sending you on a complete wild goose chase I don't know but I would like to see if you can see that because it must be big enough to see and if it's outdoor then it must be there it's this massive great amphitheater that 25,000 people all gathered can you imagine a crowd of 25,000 people all shouting the same thing the same chant great is

Artemis of the Ephesians great is Artemis of the Ephesians and they're doing this for two hours it was incredible isn't it most of them didn't even know why they were there that's the problem when you go along with a crowd and when you think that everybody else is right because there's so many of them it's just like today there's so many people who refuse who do not believe in Jesus and you think well they can't be wrong because there's so many of them well they can what matters is the truth not how many people not not even if you were the only person in your home or in your town or in your school or in your street who was a follower of Jesus if the gospel is the truth which it is then it's worth being alone and standing for

Jesus but you have to go against the crowd to be a Christian the crowd says one thing you say another and this crowd could easily they could easily I think it's a miracle that there was no deaths that day because they were on the rampage they were absolutely furious they were just there was a crowd mentality some cry one thing some another for the assembly was in confusion most of them didn't even know why they had come together the Jews the Jewish people now the Jews they they were a section by themselves and remember they weren't they weren't Christians but they were afraid that the crowd would turn against them so they found this man called Alexander and Alexander wanted to go up and tell them listen this has nothing to do with us please vent your anger on Paul and all these men who are preaching the gospel don't take this out but when they realized he was a Jew they recognized for two hours they cried out with one voice great is Artemis of the

Ephesians and this the day was saved and you know this is how God in his providence comes in and I'm going to end with this we believe that nothing takes place in life outside of the providence of God and very often God uses wisdom to bring peace to a situation give you an example of that remember the man who was close to Daniel and who was kind of the go-between between Daniel and the king now that man wasn't a believer but he was a reasonable and a wise person now here's another here's another couple of reasonable and wise people and we thank God for these people in society we thank God for where they're in office and where they're in government and where reason and logic prevail because some of them you'll read that in verse 31 even some of the Asiarchs

Asiarchs in verse 31 what's an Asiarch well an Asiarch is a member of the corner basically a councillor member of the town council okay and then there's the town clerk who won the day at the end and was able to manage by his his powers of persuasion to bring the whole heat of the situation down to calm once again he would be the lord the provost the convener of the council we would call him in Stornoway this would be the convener this was this was the man who the town clerk he quietened the crowd and he said men of Ephesus who is there who does not know that the city of Ephesians is the temple keeper of the great Artemis and of the sacred stone that fell from the sky I wonder what that stone was that fell from the sky most people believe it was a meteor and of course again if you have a meteor that falls it's all right for us to say because we know what a meteor is but imagine you didn't know anything about the universe then what would you think you would think that

[38 : 33] God the gods had sent down a rock to the world and you would start some kind of and most people believe that that was what that was what started the building of the great temple to Artemis and that the sacred stone that fell from the sky and he managed at the last to be able to quieten the crowd in case anyone was killed God in his mercy intervened in a strange and in a providential way well that's the kind of thing that happened in Acts on Paul's journeys we've seen that we've seen before how in the most extraordinary way God was working through his people from day to day from year to year to bring the gospel to people we've seen before how God provides ways and opens up ways for his people for Christians to be able to share the gospel even in the most extraordinary ways here's one of this should be a challenge for every one of us who believes and loves Jesus but it should be a challenge for those of you who have still to come to Jesus as well come come into the kingdom of

God you might have you might say to yourself tonight well if I was there I would have been safely within that crowd of 25,000 people was that really the safest place to be I don't think so safest place is always in Christ because whatever happens you know that you've got God on your side and if God is for you no one can be against you let's pray Father in heaven bless your word to us now we thank you for it we pray that you will embed your word in our hearts and we pray that we will benefit from being together this evening in Jesus name amen you