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Acts 19:11-20 “A City-Wide Revival”

Intro. Last Sunday we discussed the beginning of a great gospel work in the large city of Ephesus in Asia Minor, which in our day is the country of Turkey. Paul and about a dozen others were filled with the Holy Spirit, ready to share the gospel with the people of that city. It says in v.10 that after two years of work in Ephesus, all of Asia heard the word of the Lord. No doubt the church in Ephesus was already becoming a great, influential church.

But in spite of this great work of God, the church at Ephesus still needed a revival. We see evidence of this from vv.18-19, where we see that some in the church had professed faith in Christ, but they still were holding on to some things from their past life. They needed to get things right with God.

Can we deny that the same is true today? There are probably many church members in this community that are holding on to some secret sins from their past. Even though we have a good church, and many good people, we still need a revival like God sent in Ephesus, and at other times in the past. I have read about such revivals also in my church history books. At times there has been such a moving of the Spirit of God upon the hearts of men that Christians would get right with God, sinners would be converted, and the joy of the Lord would abound among God’s people.

Now this passage in Acts tells us a few principles that we need to know and follow to see revival in this church. I think we would all agree that we need revival! The question is, “Will our church experience such a revival?” Well, we can if we learn the principles that we see here. While it is true that revival is the work of God, it is also true that God usually sends revival in response to the prayers and purity of His people. So let’s look at this passage and trust God to begin a revival in our hearts today!

First, I want you to know that:

I. THE POWER FOR REVIVAL IS AVAILABLE

A real soul-stirring revival is the work of God. It is not the result of manipulation. It is not a work of the flesh. When God works in such a way that God’s people get right, and sinners get converted, and lives are changed, we know that God’s power is at work. We need God’s power if we are to experience revival!

In our text we can see that it was the power of God and the fear of God that initiated the great revival that we read about in vv.17-20. In vv.11-12 we read of the power of God at work that helped to bring about the great revival that followed. Luke says in v.11, “Now God worked unusual miracles by the hands of Paul.” The word translated “miracles” in v.11 is from the Greek word *dunamis*, from which we get our word “dynamite.” Here it refers to an act of power. Luke notes that these were “unusual” or uncommon manifestations of power. Miracles, by definition, are unusual. So these miracles were even *more* unusual. God was working mightily through Paul. The imperfect tense of “worked” indicates that these miracles were occurring on a regular basis, and not just occasionally. Notice a few things about this working of God’s power.

A. The Source – Notice in v.11 that Luke says, “Now God worked unusual miracles....” As

people witnessed what was happening, they might have concluded that Paul was doing these great miracles. But notice how Luke ascribes these demonstrations of power to God, and not Paul. God was the true source of these miracles.

Even so, I want God to work in such a way that people will recognize it as the work of God, not man.

B. The Human Instrument - But Luke adds in the last of v.11 that these miracles were wrought “by the hands of Paul.” God works through people. When a great work needs to be done, He almost always chooses to have a human instrument. Even when God parted the Red Sea, He did so only when Moses lifted his staff (Ex. 14:16, 21).

But we should realize that God does not work mightily through just anyone. If you want the power of God flowing through your life, you need to be like Paul. We need to pray like Paul (Eph. 1:16; 6:18). Prayer is the primary means that we have to see God work in a powerful way. We need to witness like Paul. God promises the power of the Holy Spirit when we witness (Acts 1:8). We also need to be dedicated to the Lord like Paul.

C. The Unusual Means of God’s Manifest Power – Luke says in v.12, “so that even handkerchiefs or aprons were brought from his body to the sick, and the diseases left them and the evil spirits went out of them.” The means of healing spoken of here is one reason these miracles were described as “unusual.” Normally, healing would come through the laying on of hands and prayer. Sometimes anointing with oil was mentioned. But here, healing came without Paul even being present, but healing came when cloths from Paul were placed on the sick! The pieces of material which had been in contact with Paul were those which he used as sweat-rags and aprons while he engaged in his leather-working and tent making trade. Amazingly, if the cloths were brought to the sick and laid on them, they would be healed. Nothing is even said about Paul praying over these cloths.

A similar means of healing is recorded in Mt. 9:20-22 when the woman who had had “an issue of blood 12 years” pressed into the crowd and touched the hem of Jesus garment. Then, she was healed.

Luke does not state that Paul actively encouraged this means of healing, though he could have to bring healing to more people. I tend to think that people acted on their own, and God chose to heal through these cloths for the reasons I will share in just a moment. This is also somewhat similar to what we read in Acts 5:15, “so that they brought the sick out into the streets and laid them on beds and couches, that at least the shadow of Peter passing by might fall on some of them.” In all these cases, it was the faith that was the real instrument of their healing, not the garment or shadow itself.

This, of course, is the origin of so-called prayer cloths that some preachers will send you for a donation (like Morris Cerullo). Prayer cloths are even for sale on the Internet! But don’t expect theirs to work like they did in Paul’s ministry due to the special contextual reason for such means of healing, that I will discuss in a moment..

D. The Results of God’s Power – Luke says in the last of v.12, “and the diseases left them and the evil spirits went out of them.” There were miracles of physical healing. Yet the greater triumphs were not the healing of bodies, but in the healing of souls. Certainly, many were saved, granting the forgiveness of sins and eternal life (cf. v.10). For many, despair was turned into hope. And some, who were bound by demonic oppression, were set free when God used Paul to cast out

demons (v.12b). It is not surprising that the casting out of demons was mentioned here, since as we shall see, Ephesus was under the grip of occult practices.

The lesson for us is that we need the power of God working in our lives if we are going to have revival.

E. The Reasons for Such Manifestations of Power - Why did God reveal His power to such a great extent? One reason may be that Ephesus was one of the largest cities of the ancient world, and God wanted a strong church planted there. Indeed, the influence of the church of Ephesus continued for centuries. Yet there was a special situation that required a special manifestation of power. As you may recall from last Sunday, Ephesus was the center of the worship of the fertility goddess Diana. Furthermore, many of the people of Ephesus were also heavily involved in occult practices such as sorcery and black magic, as we see in vv.18-19. Satan had a tremendous stranglehold on this city. So in the wisdom of God extra-ordinary miracles were deemed necessary to appeal to such a superstitious city as Ephesus. Where the power of Satan was strongly evident, the power of God was shown to be greater, just as it was in Egypt when God delivered His people from bondage. Such power was also manifested to affirm the apostle Paul was His spokesman.

Thus, the particular evangelistic approach we use and pray for should depend on the cultural and spiritual context. Thus, we are not to expect that God is going to heal people through sweat cloths today! What we see here was an unusual accommodation to a particular group of people.

Another requirement of revival is this:

II. THE PRETENDING OF CHRISTIANITY MUST CEASE

I believe that spiritual pretention is one of the great hindrances of a moving of God in a church or community. Too many are just pretending to be Christians. But just because you *act* like a Christian and talk like a Christian doesn't make it so. Too many are just pretending to be like the apostles, preaching and supposedly working miracles. There are too many preachers and faith-healers out there who see what one person does by the power of the Spirit. Then, they think they can get up and do the same thing, and if they don't have the power, they just pretend like they do. A great revival comes when those who pretend to be Christians quit pretending, and openly repent of their sins and confess a genuine faith in Christ.

A. Examples of Spiritual Pretention – Now vv.13-14 give one example of some religious people who tried to use Christianity for their own advantage. In v.13 we read of “some of the itinerant Jewish exorcists....” They practiced the trade of casting out demons. Such was a common practice in those days, for demon possession was a serious and wide-spread problem, and especially so in the city of Ephesus. So these Jews would travel around and hold meetings and offer their services in casting out demons. Since Sceva (v.14) was a chief priest of sorts, he enjoyed prestige among those of his trade. He may have known the true pronunciation of the Name of God, which was commonly unknown among pagans and even Jews.

While they were in Ephesus, they learned about how effective Paul was in casting out demons, as we see in the last of v.12. They certainly did not have nearly as great of success. They noticed that Paul used the name of Jesus in casting out demons. Jesus, or *Yeshua*, was still a common name at that time among the Jews. If the name worked for Paul, then they supposed it would work for them. So we read in the last of v.13 that they “took it upon themselves to call the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, ‘We exorcize you by the Jesus

whom Paul preaches.’”

Now the point is they tried to imitate Paul and use the name of Jesus as a kind of magic formula, for behind the use of magic was the idea that if one possessed the proper formula, he could compel the unseen powers to do his bidding. Even today, we think of words like “Abracadabra” or “Hocus Pocus.” Yet they were just pretenders, imitators, play actors. They had no relationship with Jesus Christ, and yet they tried to use His name to their own advantage.

This reminds me of what Jesus warned about in Matt. 7:21-23, “Not everyone that says unto me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter into the kingdom of heaven...Many will say to me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? And in thy name have cast out demons?’ ...And then will I profess unto them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me’....”

B. The Dangers of Spiritual Pretention - When you fool around with the occult, or when you try to deal with demons without the power of Christ, you are in serious danger. The demons did not obey such pretentious exorcists. Here is why. They literally said in the last of v.15, “the Jesus I know (*ginosko* - recognize), and the Paul I am acquainted with; but you, who are you?” It’s like, “Who are you to tell me what to do?”

The attempt of the sons of Sceva to try to duplicate the miracles of Paul backfired to their humiliation and hurt. The demon possessed man “leaped on them” like a panther. The power of the demon was so great that one man was able to overcome seven men! They quickly realized that they were no match for this demon possessed man, and their only choice was to flee. We read in the last of v.16 “that they fled out of that house naked and wounded.” If they did not flee completely naked, they at least fled with badly torn garments. They also experienced being “wounded.” I find it interesting that the Greek word so translated is *traumatizo*. They were indeed traumatized! I believe they learned their lesson!

There are several lessons we can learn from what happened to these men:

- Don’t try to mix elements of Christianity into false religion. That’s what the cults have done.
- Don’t try to use Jesus for personal gain.
- If you do, you will meet a similar fate. One day all who have used the name of Jesus wrongly, all who have made merchandise of the souls of men and of sick people, will meet with a worse fate than did the sons of Sceva! You will end up like the people in Matt. 7 who heard those words from Jesus, “Depart from me, I never knew you.”

So we have seen that the power of God for revival is available, and the pretending of Christianity must cease. Finally, to experience revival:

III. THE PURIFICATION OF CHRISTIANS MUST BEGIN

God is a holy and righteous God. Real revival comes as God’s people become more truly holy and righteous. How does this come about?

A. Through the Conviction of Sin – As a result of what happened to the sons of Sceva, we read in v.17, “This became known both to all Jews and Greeks dwelling in Ephesus; and fear fell on them all...” What had happened to the seven sons of Sceva was told all over town. But the effect on the Ephesian church was even greater, in that it convicted the saints concerning the hold that the occult had retained on them even after they became believers. These Gentile converts had a struggle to shake off their corrupt environment. This fear that fell on them all was equivalent to being convicted of their sin of retaining some relationship with demonic practices. Indeed, one of

the ministries of the Holy Spirit is to convict us of sin. Jesus said in John 16:8, “And when He has come, He will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment.” God’s Word is also a powerful means of the conviction of sin, for it is used by the Spirit of God.

How many professing Christians today secretly dabble in astrology and occult practices? How many of these same people just want to add Jesus as another means of good luck? They wear a cross, or they carry prayer beads. They need to realize the worthlessness and danger of these practices and the power of the gospel to changed lives that are filled with love, joy, and peace. Others are secretly involved in pornography, or illegal drug use, or a host of other secret sins. Revival begins with powerful conviction of sin of such sins, where you fear God. You are concerned that God knows what you have been doing, and will hold you accountable, just as the sons of Sceva were taught a lesson!

Then, purification of sin comes:

B. Through Confession of Sin – We read in v.18, “And many who had believed came confessing and telling their deeds.” Notice that they “had believed.” They had previously made a profession of faith. Now, under conviction of sin, we see in the Greek that they “kept coming” to confess their involvement in the occult. They also confessed their sins, and openly repudiated them. Specifically, they were “telling their deeds.” “Deeds” (*praxis*) here can be translated “spells.”¹ They publicly announced the spells they had kept. They were living a double life, confessing Christ on the one hand, but retaining their occultic practices.

Why was it important to confess their spells? According to magical theory, the potency of a spell is bound up with its secrecy; if it be divulged, it becomes ineffective. This insured that such practices would never be used again. (By the way, watch out for a religion or other group that emphasizes the secrecy of its teachings (Masons, etc.). Some of these Christians used to be witches and mediums and such as that.

Some people will never have victory over sin in their lives until they confess their sins to God, and confess their sins at least in a more general way publicly. Confession is one way we break the power of sin. When you are bound by a recurring sin, you need to confess it, and ask God’s people to pray for you. In fact, James 5:16 says, “Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed...” There should be an open repudiation of all occult connections by the converted person. Otherwise, Satan will continue to have a foothold in that person’s life. Eph. 4:27 says, “nor give place to the devil.”

Finally, to experience a great revival, there must also be purification of sin:

C. Through Complete Consecration - These people really repented. We read in v.19, “Also, many of those who had practiced magic brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all...” They wanted a complete break with the occult, so they burned their occult books. What a glorious thing it would be if in every city all the blasphemous, degrading pornographic books, magazines, music, and DVDs were all piled up and burned!

One time King David defeated the Philistine army and the Philistines abandoned their idols as they fled from the battlefield. We read in 1 Chron. 14:12 that David ordered that his men burn the idols. No doubt he did so lest they became a source of temptation.

Today, we would like to see revival; we would like to receive blessings from God; we would like to see a Great Awakening. But are we willing to pay the price of revival? Are we willing

¹ The phrase “Ephesian writings” (*Ephesia grammata*) was commonly used in antiquity for documents containing spells and formulae (Bruce, *Paul*, 291).

to make a complete break with our sinful past? Are we willing to put God above everything else in our lives? Have we given up anything for God? If you have an occultic charms or other such items, you need to get rid of them! Some of you may have some magazines you need to destroy. Some of you may have some illegal drugs that you need to get rid of safely. You may have some of the devil's music that you need to throw in the fire. Yes, some music that Christian people listen to is certainly not consistent with Philippians 4:8. Some of you may need to burn your cigarettes, not while inhaling its smoke, but burn them in the bonfire and smoke no more. Whatever it is that you love, in spite of knowing it is wrong, give it up for God. Whatever things a person must get rid of to be right with God, those things should be destroyed, not given to someone else. Perhaps you keep having a problem with the same sin. Now is the time to make a firm break with that sin.

Notice also that they were willing to forsake their sinful past no matter what the financial cost. Those books they burned cost a lot of money. 50,000 pieces of silver was equivalent to the daily wage of 50,000 men! If each silver piece was an ounce, that would be over \$750,000 in today's money!² Someone might suggest that they should have taken them down to the second-hand book store and realized a little money on them. But they knew that if they were sinful, no one should use them.

D. The Result of a Purified Church – Luke says in v.20, “So the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed.” Notice that Luke gives emphasis on role of the Word of God in the great revival of Ephesus. A cleansed and revived church was the key to continuing increase (note imperfect tense). It was when the Ephesian Christians reached the point of complete surrender that the Word of God grew mightily and prevailed. Note the contrast between the demon prevailing upon the sons of Sceva, and the Word of God prevailing upon the city (same Gk. word, *ischuo*). What a great triumph for Jesus Christ!

What does it mean that the Word of God prevailed? It means two things primarily. First, it means that the power of the Word of God prevailed in changing the lives of people. Rom. 1:16 says the gospel is “the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believes.” Secondly, it means that many more people heard the Word of God. I believe that many more people came to the Christian gatherings to hear God's Word after such demonstrations of the power of God, and the consecration of God's people.

Conclusion: The same can be true today. We have the same gospel. We also have the same Holy Spirit. Yet I do not see the Word of God prevailing in this sense today. Less people are hearing the Word of God. We need to pray and seek the face of God, turn from our sin, and witness and invite so that more people hear the Word of God, and experience the change of life that the Word of God can bring! Oh, that we would see our church and other churches filled with people once again to hear God's Word!

Sources: F.F. Bruce, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Book of the Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1954); H. Leo Eddleman, *An Exegetical and Practical Commentary on Acts* (Dallas: Books of Life Publishers, 1974); Ajith Fernando, *The NIV Application Commentary: Acts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998); Oliver B. Greene, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Vol. 1 (Greenville, SC: The Gospel Hour, Inc., 1968); Everett F. Harrison, *Acts: The Expanding Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1975); H.A. Ironside, *Acts* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers 1943); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 4 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1983); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 5:30] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2017); A.T. Robertson, *New Testament Word Pictures*, Vol. IV (Nashville:

² Based on a calculation using world wage data in <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-17512040>.

Broadman Press, 1931). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982). (Maclaren and Vaughan read, but not used).

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