

Acts 18:18:24–19:22: “Ends” In Mind VII: Return to Ephesus I

Introduction:

Today marks the first of a couple of messages that focus on Paul’s time in Ephesus. Next week we’ll see a really engaging, intense passage. Today’s harder to make sense of, although, honestly, it’s a way easier passage to preach on than the one Bob was saddled with last week, and he brought up a ton of amazing things. So I’m not complaining. If you did miss that message, it’s online; check it out.

Let me pray that this would go well, however God reckons that today.

Prayer:

Meanwhile...

While all the things Bob talked to us about last week were taking place, things were happening back in Ephesus, where Paul had left with the promise that he’d return if it was God’s will. Luke gives us the story of what’s happening. And it's great. I'm basically skipping it, though.

There's a really important Jewish convert named Apollos who basically sets up shop in Ephesus. He's come from Alexandria, he's heard about Jesus somewhere, and he just starts preaching, starts convincing the synagogue about Christ. He's awesome; some people think he wrote Hebrews. He's eventually commissioned to mission work in Corinth, in Achaia Province, to preach there. But his theology isn't perfect; he needs corrected by Aquila and Priscilla. He missed, somehow, too, that Christians were supposed to receive the Holy Spirit, which is a huge promise, and it's not clear why Aquila and Prisca don't get that straightened out.

But because Paul's the focus of Acts, Luke brings us back to what Paul's doing, and what he's doing is basically heading back to Ephesus. Luke makes it sound like you can still see Apollos ship leaving port as Paul donkeys it into town.

Paul's Return & the Spirit's Arrival in Ephesus:

We read this:

19 While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples 2 and

asked them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when[a] you believed?”

They answered, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.”

3 So Paul asked, “Then what baptism did you receive?”

“John’s baptism,” they replied.

4 Paul said, “John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus.” 5 On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. 6 When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues[b] and prophesied. 7 There were about twelve men in all.

And again, I don’t want to make a rule, from this passage, about the way the Holy Spirit comes on people in the New Testament. Some will, and you can find those rules if you want them. What is clear is that it does matter that we realize those who follow Jesus are meant to have the Spirit at home in and among

them. Apollos didn't have this information; he missed it somehow. Paul has to correct that, here. You don't have the whole story of Jesus without it. What we realize, down the line, is that Apollos must have come to realize this, too. Paul would have had heavy things to say about him to the Corinthians in this letters if Apollos hadn't.

Summary:

Luke gives us a summary of Paul's time in Ephesus. It's more of what we've seen. He corrects bad Christian theology; setting people right about the Holy Spirit. He follows Apollos into the synagogue, preaching like Apollos did. He leaves when people get upset. He preaches daily. A couple of years pass, and Jesus becomes famous in the area. Luke says,

“God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, so that even handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him were taken to the sick, and their illnesses were cured and the evil spirits left them.”

That *is* extraordinary! We've seen other things like it; people trying to get in the way of Peter's shadow to be healed by it. This is pretty wild, though, right?

Economics: Healing Commodified

But what this really does, as far as the story Luke is telling us goes, is introduce an economic reality to this story. Healing and saving miracles have become commodities, here. And of course they have! Healing is valuable. You can imagine people hearing Paul, watching as God heals people through Paul. We can imagine what it would be like to want that for someone we love, to believe God could do the same for them, but they aren't there. So we take what we've got--an apron or a hankie--and get as close as we can to Paul, touch him with it, and run home in hope, offering it to the person we love who we've convinced of God's power, and watching as they're healed, and praising God for it.

And if this is treating Jesus like a magic potion, well, then...I don't know. At least God's the one who's getting the glory. And before we dismiss it out of hand as immature or faithless, we should watch how often we cross our fingers or mutter prayers when we want our favorite team to score.

The thing is, healing is still valuable, right? Of immeasurable worth. In fact, there's not a small

subculture of Christianity that believes you can buy this little shawl or that little hankie that's been prayed over by some televangelist they follow, which has healing power for them. Look: I think it's a scam, but I'm also aware of how cynical I can be.

What we see, here, though, is this: The healing Paul offers has turned into something so valuable it's being commodified, captured and carried around, taken to those who need it by those who love them. We can only dismiss that if we've got no imagination.

Economics: Piece of the Action

In the spiritual market that Paul's operating in, though, he's got competitors. At least, they seem themselves as his competitors. Over and over again we see that the synagogues Paul preaches in eventually reject him, as people become convinced of his testimony about Jesus. But there's a synagogue family in Ephesus that has a healing and saving business.

Their patriarch is Sceva, a chief priest. His seven sons drive out evil spirits, and they see the success that Paul is having by invoking Jesus' lordship, invoking God's right over the bodies of those who are possessed by these evil spirits. And they want to add

this new technique to their repertoire, you know? They want to reclaim the market share that Jesus has taken from them. They try to do this even though they don't have the faith in Jesus that Paul and those who trust him do. They want the benefits--power, esteem, economic improvement--that come of following Jesus, but don't want the commitment. And who doesn't, right? We read this:

13 Some Jews who went around driving out evil spirits tried to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who were demon-possessed. They would say, "In the name of the Jesus whom Paul preaches, I command you to come out." 14 Seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, were doing this.

But an approximation of faith isn't respected by these evil spirits. Name-dropping doesn't impress them; relationships and authority do.

That is: To follow Jesus is to be given Jesus' authority. In being baptized, in publicly committing your life to Jesus and renouncing your old allegiances, in having the Spirit's work in your life confirmed in you as hands are laid on you and people pray for you, a person is

doing something that really does matter. It marks a change of status. For those who make this commitment, they're offered Jesus' own authority and power in the spiritual realm. Not fully, but not some tiny, easily disregarded amount, either. To be reborn, remade in the image of Christ is to be given the rights and responsibilities that come as a child of God, just as any child has rights and responsibilities in a family.

And Sceva's boys, they want all the rights and none of the responsibilities. They're ape-ing the bad example of Simon the Sorcerer in Acts 8. They want the benefits of the relationship with none of the work of a relationship. They want a cut of the healing-business, and all that comes with it, without any personal costs. But...the evil spirits are, you know, evil. They only care about who your daddy is if your daddy is God the Father. This happens:

15 One day the evil spirit answered them, "Jesus I know, and Paul I know about, but who are you?" 16 Then the man who had the evil spirit jumped on them and overpowered them all. He gave them such a beating that they ran out of the house naked and bleeding.

Now. This is big news. Word gets around. And it really blows up the economic life of Ephesus.

Economics: Disruption

Pay attention, as I read, to the economic impact of what happens after this. We read:

17 When this became known to the Jews and Greeks living in Ephesus, they were all seized with fear, and the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honor. 18 Many of those who believed now came and openly confessed what they had done. 19 A number who had practiced sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly. When they calculated the value of the scrolls, the total came to fifty thousand drachmas.[c] 20 In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power.

Ephesus becomes afraid. They realize that this isn't a game, and what Paul's talking about when he talks about God isn't irrelevant, but matters in the real world, in their world.

Confession catches, and those who have already trusted what Paul has taught about God, they give up

“practicing sorcery,” as our translation puts it. And what we have to see, because Luke brings it out, is that this is more than just a religion decision, which it totally is. But it’s also an economic decision. Healing’s been commodified; people who don’t have rights to Jesus’ power have been trying to gain esteem and cash trading on it. And to practice sorcery was to be a part of system that had economic implications. You could practice for yourself, and try to arrange for yourself what it was you wanted--healing, fame, success, protection; fortune and salvation in whatever forms they take. You could barter and sell your services, and build an economic livelihood from them, as people come to you to arrange for them healing, fame, success, protection, fortune and salvation in whatever forms they take. And the Christians in Ephesus have finally come to realize that this is no longer an option for them. They can’t be like the Sons of Sceva, who want all the benefits of Jesus and none of the costs.

And Luke brings this out in two ways. He tells us that these converts, these followers of the Way, they burn their scrolls. This is a big deal. Without those scrolls, they won’t be able to do what they’ve been doing. To burn these scrolls is to literally burn the bridge

between their old way of life and their new. And that includes this economic pivot, away from providing for themselves in a way that stands against God, in a sons of Sceva sort of way.

But in mentioning how much the scrolls were worth, Luke is pointing out that this pivot, this conversion, is one that has a permanent, unretrievable cost to them. A drachma was a day's wage. They burn 50,000 days' wages worth of scrolls. That's 137 years worth of income. There's no recovering this, you know?

And there's no, "And the Ephesians found a bunch of prosperity as they left." They weren't rewarded with treasure and pensions. They just pivoted, and left it behind.

Call it an economic sacrifice, but that misses the point, too, because generally, whether we want to or not, we treat our sacrifices as things that will get us something else, acquire us God's favor, in some way. This is more than a sacrifice, this is conversion. This is destroying their means of production, because whatever the future holds is better than the means was. This is leaving something behind, utterly, because what God has for us is better, even though we don't know what

it is.

And this economic disruption gains God fame. “In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power.” Power, here, I think has to be understood as influence, as an ability to affect the world, shift society. As something real, just like seven guys running naked and beaten from a house is a real thing, not intangibly spiritual.

We’ll see next week how this Godly power is pushed back against, how threatening the economic disruption the Church is causing is to Ephesus, and the riot that happens as a result.

Conclusions: Personal Economics

We can say a few things here. Should, really:

First, simply, following Jesus will have an economic impact on our lives. In some way.

And we know this. Whether we’re radically and secretly generous with our cash in ways the Church will never know, or we’re patrons, obviously carrying the Church’s work in the world, or both, maybe, we will be affected. And both those things are important and

critical, neither to be disregarded. If following Jesus has had no economic disruption in your life, then that's an anomaly to be reviewed, so review it.

We may leave behind some radical wealth, because to keep a hold of it is to keep God at a distance. We may be tempted to claim all the benefits of a relationship with God, only without one. We may be tempted to profit, for ourselves, from the healing that Paul would only give away.

Conclusions: World's Profits or Faith's Benefits

And while today's scene clearly shows healing commodified, Luke uses that moment to lead us into the ways the Way is economically disrupting Ephesus. Even today, the pocket hankies were pocketed and carried by people for others, not themselves. We have to hold onto the truth that the benefits of our faith are never meant to be market items. Does this make sense? You cannot buy forgiveness; to forgive is to reject being paid back. You can't trade blessings for cash. We don't sell healing, or help, or hope; we bear whatever the costs are so that we can pass them out for free, to whoever will take them, the same way that Jesus gives them to us, and bears whatever they cost, from whoever has to pay.

And this always matters for small congregations like our own, because while our society continually calls us to turn blessings and service into cash, we always have to plant our flag in faithfulness's ground, and say "No." We won't ever try to make bank from goodness. We won't charge for Christ.

Conclusions: Jesus Matters For Society! Really! Like, For Every Bit We Don't Talk About Because We Don't Want To Offend Each Other!

And I want to impress us with this, if I can:

I deeply believe that Christianity is meant to impact every system that a society has for itself. That includes economic systems. And we've both seen and talked about this already in Acts. It clearly includes religious ones. But it also includes political ones, legal ones, educational ones. When Jesus is taken seriously, the world gets turned upside down, just as when we take Jesus seriously our certainty about what's right and good are broken by the Spirit before they are restructured by the Spirit.

To follow Christ is to bear witness to virtue in every

way we organize ourselves with others. There is no such thing as a greater good, there is only such thing as a common good. Ends never justify the means; only faithfulness in the face of selfishness matters.

Following Jesus is meant to impact more than we think it is. There is nothing that is compartmentalized, that's out of bounds.

And we have to stop pretending that there are things that are off-limits, situations in which Jesus is okay with devilishness, with sin and evil, because of some greater plan, some mysterious reason, some excuse we make. When our televisions and radio turn on and our feeds update, we have to be the ones willing to wisely discern: How does Jesus matter in this political, religious, educational, legal, economic thing I'm hearing about? Because Jesus does matter. God cares about it all.

Next week we'll see as Ephesus gets really, really scared about just how disruptive Jesus could be to the basket they've put their economic, political, and religious eggs in. It's famous, and intense, and I'm looking forward to it.