

Acts: *This Present Darkness*

June 13th, 2021

INTRODUCTION

Good morning friends and welcome to West Portal. Back in 1986, Christian author Frank Peretti wrote what was to become a ground-breaking novel—*This Present Darkness*. How many of you remember this book? While fictional, the book endeavored to pull back the curtain so to speak—giving us a glimpse of what the activity of the spirit world might look like all around us, even in the midst of our everyday lives. The book sold in excess of 2.5 million copies and remained on the Christian Booksellers Association’s best seller list for over 150 consecutive weeks after its release. The book’s title comes from the famous chapter 6 of Paul’s letter to the Ephesian church—the armor of God—where the RSV says, *For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of **this present darkness**, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places*. Regardless of the book’s theology or your preference for this kind of genre, it did much to raise awareness that there is a spiritual power struggle going on around us. The victory is not in doubt, but the war is still being waged. This spiritual power struggle is front and center in Paul’s letter to the Ephesian church and it shouldn’t surprise us that it also features prominently in Paul’s time in this city—something we’ll come to today.

Ephesus

- Greatest city-center in Asia

If you have your bibles we’re in Acts 19 this morning. Paul has arrived in Ephesus and things are about to get very interesting. While you’re turning there I’ll maybe say a few things about the city itself. Ephesus was the first and greatest city-center in the Roman province of Asia. It will have rivaled some of the largest cities in the 1st Century with a population of around or above 200,000. It was located near a harbor on the western coast of modern day Turkey, making it a natural center for trade and commerce. As James mentioned last week, Ephesus was a religious center—priding itself on its spirituality.

- 25,000 seat amphitheater

It was known for its amphitheater—one of the largest in the ancient world—which could seat around 25,000 people. If any of you have attended any Saskatoon Rush lacrosse games you know what kind of electricity a crowd of closer to 15,000 can create. This amphitheater will feature prominently in our story today.

- Temple of Artemis

Ephesus was also the location of the great temple to the Greek goddess Artemis (or Diana to the Romans). Built in 550 BC this temple, with a footprint of 94,000 square feet, supported by 127 pillars (each 60 ft. high), was considered one of the 7 wonders of the Ancient World.

Much of the city's industry was related to this temple. Craftsmen sold shrines and household images of the goddess that worshipers could take with them on long journeys or dedicate in the temple itself. Anyway, enough background. Let's pick up our story. We're in Acts 19 starting at verse 8. **Read Acts 19:8-10.**

CONTENT

- a) Ephesus ministry (19:8-10)
 - In Jewish synagogue—*3 months*

I'm not sure if you remember this, but Paul first visits Ephesus at the tail-end of his 2nd missionary journey. During this brief visit, Paul limits his ministry to the Jewish synagogue, but his message was intriguing enough that he is invited to spend more time there. Now, on his 3rd missions trip, Paul obliges this request and spends 3 months ministering and speaking with a primarily Jewish audience—preaching the kingdom of God. It means Paul is presenting Jesus as the Messiah who fulfilled the OT hope of the future reign of God, bringing his long-awaited kingdom. Jesus is fulfilling God's ancient promises to the nation of Israel. Of course greater time in Ephesus doesn't necessarily lead to greater openness as, after 3 months, Paul is forced to switch ministry venues because of increasing Jewish opposition to his message.

- In secular lecture hall—*2 years*

Paul now begins hosting daily discussions in the lecture hall of Tyrannus—who was either the lecturer who taught here or the owner of the hall who rented it out to Paul. In this region it was common for public activity to largely shut down from 11am to 4pm—the ancient parallel to a Mexican siesta. Because some of the Greek manuscripts we have of Acts 19 mention these hours specifically, it is likely this was the time when Paul made himself available for teaching and discussions while working his day job as a tent-maker during the morning and evening. The result of this 2-year stint is that *all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord*. The gospel presence in this major city center begins to radiate out to the surrounding towns and villages. No doubt some who were travelling through Ephesus heard and then took the gospel back to their provinces and hometowns. Additionally, some of Paul's colleagues will have planted churches in some of the surrounding territories. It is widely believed that Epaphras, mentioned only a few times in Paul's letters, is someone who came to faith during Paul's ministry in Ephesus who went on to plant churches in Colosse, Laodicea and Heirapolis. In fact, presumably all 7 of the churches mentioned in the opening chapters of Revelation were founded in and around this time period. It's an exciting time for the gospel in the province of Asia. Let's continue our story. **Read Acts 19:11-22.**

- b) Ephesus miracles (19:11-22)

Something unusual happened in Ephesus. The ministry of persuasive discussion was complemented with an extraordinary miracle ministry. We've mentioned that Ephesus was a religious or spiritual center.

- *Ephesian writings* slang for *occult*

What we haven't expressly said is Ephesus was a center for the learning and practice of magical arts—or the occult. A few weeks ago we were in the city of Corinth—an ancient Las Vegas—and we noted that the term *Corinthianize* was a slang way of referring to illicit sexual activity. Ephesus had its own slang as well. Such was its reputation in magic and the dark arts the expression *Ephesian writings* was commonly used in antiquity for documents containing spells and incantations—something we would call occult texts today. In this context, the gospel message isn't just a new ideology, it's a power encounter between Christ and the powers of darkness. Think about this context of spiritual darkness and oppression when you read Ephesians 6 in the future—*for our struggle is not against flesh and blood*.

- *Extraordinary* handkerchiefs & aprons!?

Miracles are one of the ways God sometimes chooses to verify the truthfulness of the gospel message. We found something similar at the outset of the book of Acts. In chapter 5 we're told miracles were happening through the apostles to the extent sick people were hoping Peter's shadow would fall on them—implying this may have been a source of healing for some. Similarly, we now find handkerchiefs and aprons of Paul's seem to be endowed with healing power. In case you're curious, it's likely the handkerchiefs and aprons mentioned were those which Paul used during his day job—tent-making. In other words, the sweat rags tied around his head or waist. We're not told whether this healing ministry is something Paul deliberately adopted (as in he took these items to heal people) or whether others took these objects (representing Paul) to the sick (and God blesses this gesture). In a culture steeped in occult practices (good luck charms, bracelets, amulets, etc.) it is understandable they would use these kinds of items in connection with healing—albeit, now in the name of Jesus. Our author Luke says these were *extraordinary* miracles. This was not the norm, but something unique God chose to do in Ephesus. I find myself wondering if in a culture steeped in the awareness of dark powers, God intentionally wanted to demonstrate his authority over them. We find something similar in the story of the Exodus. Through the plagues there is a visible demonstration of God's power over and against the Egyptian gods.

Which brings to an exorcism gone horribly wrong. The gospel's initial success led other to want to get in on the act—gospel imitators. Exorcism was a common trade and best exorcists were thought to know the names of the more powerful spirits. It was also commonly believed that Jewish priests had access to the secret name of the God of Israel and its pronunciation and thus had special power over the spirit world. So it was natural for a group of Jewish exorcists (the sons of Sceva) to add Jesus' name to their incantations. There is power—saving and healing—in the name of Jesus, but its effectiveness is not mechanical. You can't just insert Jesus' name into sentence to guarantee healing results. God's not a vending machine. These Jewish sons were in for a rude awakening, when the demon rolled his eyes and said in effect, "I know who Jesus is and I respect Paul, but who the heck are you?" I'll leave it to your imagination to picture what kind of a tornado touched down in the close quarters of this home for 1 man to send 7 scurrying out of the house bleeding and naked.

Word quickly spread the name of Jesus was not something to be treated lightly. This form of judgment—don't be too casual with God—turns out to be very effective in generating a spirit of repentance in many. Just to jog your memories, we find a very similar story of sobering judgment in Acts 5 where a couple—Ananias and Sapphira—fall down dead for lying about the generosity (or lack thereof) of their monetary gift to the church. Acts 5:11 says, *Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events*. Something very similar takes place in Ephesus...*they were all seized with fear, and the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honor*.

- *Expensive* repentance

The situation with the Ephesian believers seems to be that, despite their conversion, many of them are retaining at least some of their magic practices. This is not unusual. People often come to faith out of various settings and backgrounds that they may not immediately feel the need to completely walk away from. Christian maturity is a process. As God's word begins to take up residence in our lives the ugliness and pervasiveness of sin is often revealed. When we see the ugliness of our sinfulness alongside the beauty and goodness of God, there is often a renewed willingness to let go of things that were, until then, precious to us. This is what happens in Ephesus and it results in a very expensive bonfire. The scrolls gathered and burned are almost certainly documents containing spells—think of this as an occult book burning. We're told the scrolls were valued at 50,000 drachmas. A drachma was the equivalent of a day's wage. To put this in modern terms, our minimum wage in Saskatchewan is a little over \$11. For the sake of creating a nice, round number let's assume a day's wage is a little bit above minimum--\$12.50 / hr = \$100 / day. In today's currency, a very low end estimate would suggest this bonfire consumed a minimum of 5 million dollars-worth of occult material. Luke summarizes, *the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power*—an appropriate expression for a city slowly breaking out from under a very dark spiritual influence. Let's finish off our chapter. **Read Acts 19:23-41.**

c) Ephesus mob (19:23-41)

Luke informs us there is a disturbance in the *Force*. Wait! That's a different story. There is a disturbance about the *Way*—one of the early ways Christianity was referred to. The disturbance wasn't rooted in religious differences or moral opinions, but was driven by financial motives.

- Selfish silversmiths

At the outset, we mentioned much this city's economy centered around the temple and worship of Artemis. Paul's success in convincing people that man-made gods are no gods at all is having an effect on those involved in the silversmith trade. They're making less money. The spokesperson for this complaint, a man named Demetrius—likely the leader of the silversmith guild in Ephesus—is careful to express his concern in less obviously selfish concerns.

Apparently Demetrius was a persuasive rabble-rouser as he succeeds in getting the whole city into an uproar. They seize two of Paul's colleagues—Gaius and Aristarchus (who will later become traveling companions of Paul)—and drag them to the 25,000 seat amphitheater where official and unofficial meetings were sometimes held. It sounds like Paul very much wanted to take their place, but the wisdom of the believers and some powerful, influential friends prevailed and he remained in hiding.

The essentially emotional basis of the crowd's fervor at this point means, not surprisingly, confusion reigned—as Luke notes, caught up in the emotional energy of the moment many people didn't even know why they were there. Nobody wants to become the focal point for a mob's negative energy and the Jews seem to have become particularly nervous about trouble being pointed in their direction and thrust a certain Alexander to the forefront—likely hoping to clarify that they weren't in support of Paul either. But many people wouldn't have been able to distinguish the differences of the Jewish and Christian faith—both having the same roots. As such, once the crowd realizes Alexander was Jewish they break out in a passionate chant. Soccer fans are notorious for long songs during matches. Montreal Canadians fans are known for singing *Ole* during the final minutes of an anticipated victory. I'm not sure anyone really wants to hear, much less sing *Ole* for 2 hours, but this is precisely what happens with the ancient equivalent *Great is Artemis of the Ephesians*.

- Cool-headed city clerk

Finally, due in part no doubt to the crowd's hoarse throats and eventual exhaustion, the city clerk (the most important local official who acted as a go-between for Ephesus and the Roman authorities) was able to quiet them down. He makes several well-articulated points. Listen, this city's loyalty to Artemis is well known and not in doubt—so there's no reason for this mob-like demonstration. Secondly, it doesn't appear any crime has been committed. If there are any complaints or charges that need to be filed there is a proper legal process for these things and rioting runs the risk of attracting unwanted, negative attention from Rome—which nobody wants. Much like the situation in Corinth, where the Roman governor threw the case against Paul out of court without even hearing it, we once again find a victory for the cause of the gospel which has not broken any laws or spoken against the government. Cooler heads prevail and the explosive situation is defused.

APPLICATION

Are there things we might take from a story like this that can help us better understand and take our place in the world as image-bearers (language of Genesis), witnesses (language of Acts), or simply as those who will live and tell the story of Jesus today? Here are 3 things that I find myself thinking about as we journey through these final chapters of Acts.

1. If you build it, they might not come

It is true that in both Corinth and Ephesus Paul began in the Jewish synagogue, but after the Jews rejected the message he relocated his ministry to neutral ground—the private house of Titius Justus in Corinth and the lecture hall of Tyrannus in Ephesus. Let's be honest, easily the greater part of Paul's ministry in both these cities was spent in these secular sites. I love what we get to be a part of Sunday mornings, but if we wait for people to come to church with us (the standard outreach program of the past 50+ years) there are many potential gospel conversations that will never happen—conversations about faith, moral choices, the possibility of life after death, or even just the reason why live with a hope much of our world doesn't.

One of the stories I've heard repeatedly this past year is that there have been more opportunities to build relationships with neighbors and have thoughtful conversations with coworkers than ever before. COVID has created an environment where people are once again asking big questions about life. Listen, if you have friends, neighbors or coworkers who would consider joining us in person or checking us out online, great. Just don't forget, many of these conversations are best had in our backyards, driveways, coffee shops and living rooms and nobody's better situated to host these than...you.

2. How to win friends and influence people

In 1936 Dale Carnegie published his famous self-help book, *How to Win Friends and Influence People* which, in 2011 was ranked by Time Magazine in the top 20 of all-time influential books. We're not given direct insight into Paul's evangelistic techniques, but I can't help but feel we would have much to learn from him had he ever written an evangelistic technique handbook. There's a really interesting cryptic reference we glanced over in our passage today I want to go back to. The mob has formed, they've grabbed two of Paul's companions, Paul is trying to get himself in front of the crowd when we find...*but the disciples would not let him. Even some of the officials of the province, friends of Paul, sent him a message begging him not to venture into the theater.* The Greek word for these provincial officials is *Asiarchs*. Our best understanding is that these were delegates of individual cities to the provincial Council which, among other things, regulated the worship of Rome and of the emperor. Emperor worship was not something Christians were on board with. This was an unavoidable idolatry they weren't willing to participate in. Paul will have been totally opposed to much of what these officials stood for, but they were nonetheless friends of his. Any worldview differences they might have had did not compromise the relationship. In fact, Paul was regarded so warmly by this group they reach out to beg him not to risk his life by entering the theater overrun by a mob.

There are two things that strike me about this. One, Paul is on friendly terms and warmly regarded by people we would expect to be opposed to the gospel message. Christians are often not noted for building genuine friendships with people living very non-Christian lifestyles. At the very least, Paul's example might suggest this is something we should see more of. Secondly, Paul has remained friends with people who, for the time being, don't seem to have embraced his message. One of the other sad patterns in Christian outreach has been that

Christians will build friendships as a platform to share the good news of Jesus, but if that good news isn't quickly accepted, they bail on the friendship. This has led to a sad, but understandable perspective, that Christians are only interested in converting people, not in the people themselves. Why was Paul ongoing friends with people living a different lifestyle and who hadn't come around to his message? This brings me to my final observation. I think it's because Paul understood the value of a long obedience in the same direction.

3. A long obedience in the same direction

Admittedly, I'm borrowing an expression coined by Eugene Peterson for discipleship in an instant culture. I just wonder if this isn't just as true when it comes to meaningful evangelism and outreach. In Corinth, Paul began preaching in the synagogue, presumably for several weeks (maybe months) before moving to the house of Titius Justus where he stayed for the next year and half teaching the word of God. We're then still told he remained in Corinth for some time so it's in no way unlikely his time in that city alone was close to 2 years. Did you do the math for Paul's time in Ephesus? He began with 3 months in the synagogue before switching to the lecture hall for 2 years before we're also told he stayed in the province of Asia a little longer. It is understandable he will later refer to his time in Ephesus as having lasted 3 years. That's 5 years of intentional investment. Oh, and speaking of intentional investment, we're told Paul lectured daily for 2 years in Tyrannus' lecture hall. If some of the manuscripts are correct that this was from 11am – 4pm, even if we assume Paul took the Sabbath off, that amounts to over 3,000 hours of gospel conversation and discussion. While it seems clear many did not come around to Paul's way of thinking, perhaps we should be less surprised that Luke chooses to suggest that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord.

Bill Gates is often attributed with the quote, *you and I tend to overestimate what we can accomplish in the short term, but underestimate what we can accomplish in the long term.* I suspect this may be as true of the gospel as it is of technology. Be a gospel presence in your workplaces, neighborhoods and schools. Build and foster long-term relationships with the people God surrounds you with. Learn their stories. Look for opportunities to tell your story and trust that God can bring about some amazing harvests if we are faithful in our seed-planting.