Chapter 49: The Kingdom of God Prevails

Acts 19:8–20

In the previous passage, we saw Paul's ministry to some in Ephesus who had been prepared for, but had not yet believed upon, Jesus as the Messiah. In this next section, we see how Paul's mission now brings him into contact with various kinds of Jews and Greeks. Some, through all this, believe. Others reject his message in different ways: some in ordinary (or natural) ways, and others in what we might call extraordinary (or supernatural) ways. For the former group, the rejection of the gospel is simple hardness of heart and unbelief. For the others, however, there is a complex story of paganism and the practice of magic that Luke brings to the foreground. In this passage, we see that *the kingdom of God prevails over demonic magic*.

The Kingdom of God Preached (Acts 19:8–10)

As Paul continues his ministry in Ephesus, he again labors in the synagogue (v. 8a). Sometimes, opposition in the synagogues in which Paul has labored seems to arise quickly, but here Luke tells us that "for three months [Paul] spoke boldly, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God" (v. 8b). We have seen the word for "reasoning" appear many times so far in Paul's labor with the Jews (Acts 17:2, 17; 18:4, 19), and "persuading" has also been a standard word for Christian ministry (Acts 13:43; 14:19; 17:4; 18:4). What is more unique within Acts, though, is the reference to the "kingdom of God" (Acts 1:3; 8:12; 14:22; 19:8; 28:23, 31). As Peterson writes, the phrase is used "at critical points in Acts to make a connection with the preaching of Jesus and show how scriptural expectations about the eschatological rule of God are linked with his person and work."[1] The message that Jesus is King not only of the Jews, but of the whole world, was at the heart of Paul's preaching.

Though these labors continue for an extended period of three months, ultimately "some became stubborn and continued in unbelief" (v. 9a). The word for "stubborn" from the verb σκληρύνω (*sklērunō*), which we might translate as "hardened." It is the same word used for the "hardening" of Pharaoh in Romans 9:18, and it is the word quoted from Psalm 95:8 in Hebrews to plead with God's people that they would not harden their hearts "as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness" (Heb. 3:8, 13, 15; 4:7). Here, the hardness of their stubborn hearts led them not only to turn away from the gospel, but also toward "speaking evil of the Way before the congregation" (v. 9b). As we have so often seen, Paul takes that opposition as his cue to move on to deal with those in whom the Spirit of God is actively working, so he "took the disciples with him, reasoning daily in the hall of Tyrannus" (v. 9c). Again, this withdrawal is not a surrender on Paul's part, but rather reflects an understanding of his mission to preach the gospel as widely as he can, trying to find the good soil on which the seeds of the gospel would fall. Ultimately, Paul labored in this area for "two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks" (v. 10).

[1] Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 535.

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The Kingdom of God Protected (Acts 19:11–16)

During this time, Luke tells us that "God was doing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, so that even handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched his skin were carried away to the sick, and their diseases left them and the evil spirits came out of them" (vv. 11–12). Many commentators draw a link between this passage and the efforts of those who brought their sick out into the streets so that Peter's "shadow might fall on some of them" (Acts 5:15). There is some unclarity about what is happening here, but three points stand out. First, these are miracles that "God was doing" (v. 11a). This is not any kind of magic—least of all *Paul's* magic—but the sovereign work of God.[2] Second, these were "extraordinary miracles" (v. 11b). We have no foundation from this text to support the pursuit of "relics" of the apostles in the attempt to draw some power from handling the physical materials that the apostles touched.[3] Third, God did these extraordinary miracles "by the hands of Paul" (v. 11c). Thus, "Paul is but a mediator of God's power, which attests to God's approval of Paul."[4]

Pagan Myth and Magic

Why, then, would God perform these kinds of extraordinary miracles at all? As we will see, the Lord was setting up a stark contrast to the superstitious, magic pursuits of the Ephesians. Magic, sorcery, and witchcraft have always been a demonic pursuit throughout history in ways that were especially connected to a pagan and mythical understanding of the world. (Keep in mind that in the next passage we will see the paganism of Ephesus on full display in protest of the loss of glory for Artemis, the patron goddess of Ephesus; Acts 19:21–41.) Cultures and religions shaped by the concept of myth share three foundational ideas about the cosmos.[5] First, myth understands creation as the result of a violent battle between the gods. Magic is a participation in the ongoing aspects of that conflict in order to gain power for the one practicing magic. Second, time does not progress in a linear way from the beginning (creation) to a clear endpoint (consummation, in Christianity). Instead, time is the cyclical repetition of the ancient creation conflicts at specific times and seasons. To the pagan mind, their worship at high festival seasons was not a commemoration of an event, but the participation in the reinstitution of that event. That is, the restoration of the cosmos back to a normal, neutral state depends on worshipers re-enacting and re-establishing the original order of the creation conflict.[6] Third, that understanding of the pagan worshiper's participation in the conflict of

[2] Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 537.

[3] "The skin of the hand is not different from the handkerchief or apron touched by that skin of the hand. In every case the *person* through whom the divine power to heal reaches the sufferer is recognized. The difference is only superficial just as Luke says, 'Not those happening (ordinarily)' as is the case when the apostle is present in person." (Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 791.)

[4] Bock, *Acts*, 602.

[5] For the ideas in this paragraph, see Brevard S. Childs, *Myth and Reality in the Old Testament*, 2nd ed., SBT 27 (London: SCM Press, 1962). For a more accessible introduction, see John N. Oswalt, *The Bible Among the Myths: Unique or Just Different?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009).

[6] "In the drama of the cult an actualization of the original cosmic events takes place in which that which once occurred is again realized *hic et nunc* [here and now]. The reality of the mythical, timeless event enters into the present moment of time. As in the primeval age, the participant shares directly in the elemental powers of the creation. In the cultic drama he partakes of the power of the primeval age which is loosed from all time sequence. 'Everything is just as it was on that first day.'" (Childs, *Myth and Reality in the Old Testament*, 19.)

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the gods extended beyond the high festivals into everyday life, using magic to access divine power for the worshiper's own purposes. As Oswalt explains, the pagan mind knows no boundaries between this world and the worlds of the gods, since, "Once you allow boundaries anywhere in the cosmos, it becomes impossible for me to control things, to manipulate reality, through the use of magic."[7]

God's word, however, tells us a very different story. In God's inspired Scriptures, we read that creation came about not because of violent conflict between the gods, but because of the simple word of power spoken by the one, true, living God, who brought all things into existence out of nothing. In the Scriptures, we read about a clear plan of progressive, redemptive history, in which God prepared the world for the coming of his Son and then, in the fullness of time, sent him into the world for us and for our salvation. Finally, we gather for worship every week on the Lord's Day to commemorate our Lord's resurrection as we *await* our own resurrection. We do not re-raise Jesus from the dead in our Lord's Day worship, but proclaim him as truly, really, bodily risen from the dead and now reigning at the right hand of his Father. All of these ideas exhibit sharp boundaries between the Creator and his creatures, although they also invite us into union and communion with him through faith in Christ. We do not come into contact with the living God to manipulate him or to divert his power into magical pursuits of our own purposes. Rather, we trust his leading and depend upon his power to lead us through life. Thus, God's word teaches us of a greater power than magic can offer, but importantly, a power that we *do not control*.

The Repudiation of Superstitious Magic

So, the Lord's purpose in these miracles by the hands of Paul was not to display a new kind of magic. Lenski writes, "Ephesus and Asia were full of superstition, magic, charms, and everything else of that kind. It is reversing things to claim that magical powers were superstitiously attributed also to Paul. The very opposite was the effect: the people turned from all devilish arts, burned their magical books and papers, and accepted the Lord's Word."[8] The miracles wrought here were for the purpose of confirming the gospel that Paul preached, all to the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Yet, some looked upon the power of Paul and began to try to wield the power manifested through Paul for their own purposes. In the "itinerant Jewish exorcists" we see the same kind of pagan, mythical, magical understanding of the world mentioned above. They are not genuinely seeking to follow the Lord, but only to speak his name as though it were a powerful source of magic: "Then some of the itinerant Jewish exorcists undertook to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, 'I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul proclaims'" (v. 13). As Polhill writes, "Ancient magicians were syncretists and would borrow terms from any religion that sounded sufficiently strange to be deemed effective. These Jewish exorcists of Ephesus were only plying their trade. Paul's 'spell' in Jesus' name seemed effective for him, so they gave it a try."[9] It is unclear who "Sceva" was, since there are no records of a high priest in Jerusalem named Sceva; however, whoever this figure was, the value of identifying themselves as the "sons of Sceva" was clear: "As high priest, the only one who could enter the holy of holies, he would have been deemed to have extraordinary

[7] Oswalt, *The Bible Among the Myths*, 56–57.

[8] Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 792.

[9] Polhill, *Acts*, 403.

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powers among those who practiced the magical arts."[10]

Yet, when these sons of Sceva attempted to wield the name of Jesus, the evil spirit had no regard for their words: "Jesus I know, and Paul I recognize, but who are you?" (v. 15). Lenski points out that, grammatically, the word "you" is brought to the front of the final phrase: "But you, who are you?"[11] The demon indirectly acknowledges the power of Jesus over him; however, because these men have no connection with Jesus, the demon is free to attack them instead of submitting to the words that were wielded only as a charm and meant nothing to their faith.[12]

The Kingdom of God Prevailing (Acts 19:17–20)

Luke next writes that "this became known to all the residents of Ephesus, both Jews and Greeks. And fear fell upon them all, and the name of the Lord Jesus was extolled" (v. 17). As word of the demonic rejection of these exorcists spread—along with word of the greater power of Paul in the name of Jesus—that word had the effect of bringing about fear and faith. The kingdom of God that had been rejected by the hard-hearted Jews was now spread further among Jews and Greeks as they came to fear the Lord Jesus Christ. As a result, "many of those who were now believers came, confessing and divulging their practices" (v. 18). Bock explains that "divulging of spells is important, as one of the keys to magic is the secrecy and mystery behind the spells. Once made public, the spell is perceived to be impotent."[13] More than divulging spells, many burned their books of magic arts, even though those books were incredibly valuable (v. 19).

The final statement of this passage is key: "So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily" (v. 20). The word for "mightily" is literally "according to power," and Bock notes, "The allusion to power (κράτος, *kratos*) here is no accident, given the battle with magic."[14] The word of the Lord came to be seen as more powerful than the spells and incantations of the pagan magicians. Through this powerful display, the gospel of Jesus Christ was preached and believed upon by more and more people.

Discussion Questions

1. What does Paul do in his ministry in the synagogue (v. 8)? Where have we seen him act in similar ways before in the Book of Acts? How long does he persist in this ministry? How does he shift the focus of his ministry once some remain hard of heart and reject his message (v. 9)? How should Paul's actions inform the long-term, ordinary ministry of the church? How far does the message of the gospel reach (v. 10)?

2. Who did these "extraordinary miracles" (v. 11a)? By whose hands did God do these miracles (v. 11b)? What was unusual about these miracles, even from the more ordinary miracles that God typically performed through Paul (v. 12)? How do these miracles compare to the practice of magic in

[10] Polhill, *Acts*, 404.

[11] Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 794–95.

[12] Polhill, *Acts*, 404–05.

[13] Bock, *Acts*, 604.

[14] Bock, *Acts*, 605.

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view through the rest of the passage? Why did the Jewish exorcists begin to incorporate the name of Jesus into their practices (vv. 13–14)? How did this work out (vv. 15–16)?

3. Why did these events bring such fear upon Jews and Greeks alike in the city of Ephesus (v. 17)? How does fearing the name of Jesus fit in with the gospel of Christ's mercy? How might we be tempted to approach God if we did not fear him? What kind of changes do these events prompt those who had practiced magic arts (vv. 18–19)? How decisive of a break were they making with their former practices in the occult?

4. Through all this, why does Luke tell us that "the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily" (v. 20)? The word translated "mightily" is literally "according to power." Why does Luke emphasize the power of the word of God? To what degree does interest and practice in the occult, and magic specifically, persist in the modern world? Why do you think this is? How does the word of the Lord promise to protect believers from the magic arts?

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