

The Life-Changing Word

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[0 : 0 0] Well I wonder whether you've ever turned up at a party when it's in full swing. You know when the music is throbbing, the disco ball is spinning, Sammy's lighting up the dance floor, all the food and drink is laid out, there's laughter, there's chatter everywhere, everything is in full swing.

And you know you feel either this is the right time, I've just arrived, that's great, or you wish, you know I should have been here a bit earlier. Well as we look this week and continue in Ephesus, we see ministry in the city of Ephesus in full swing.

It's all happening as they say in Ephesus as the impact of Paul's ministry is seen not just in the city, but across the province of Asia as well.

But first a recap, this is our last week here in Acts. And last week before Paul arrived, Priscilla and Aquila had taken Apollos aside to teach him.

Then Apollos had gone to Corinth himself to serve there and Paul arrives and converts, remember the twelve men who knew only about John's baptism.

[1 : 2 0] Now all these are signs of God's Spirit at work. But as we now see in verse 8, things are ramping up as we pick up the action. We read on the slide, Paul answered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God.

And so again, Paul begins at the synagogue as he normally does, and he argues persuasively about the kingdom of God. Now this does not mean that he's no longer preaching about Jesus as the Messiah, but rather it's Buick's way of saying that he's now connecting, he's also connecting, the fact that to preach Christ is to proclaim God's kingdom coming through him.

It's about showing from the Old Testament that the promises of the Messiah has now been fulfilled in Christ, God's King. But some of them became obstinate.

They refused to believe and publicly maligned the way. Now here again the phrase the way is another reference or alternate reference to Christianity.

And it's already been used three times in Acts so far, each time in the context of opposition. Now Paul initially himself, if you recall, had sought out disciples of the way.

[2 : 4 1] He had gone to Damascus to do that, to arrest them. Now in this passage the Jews publicly maligned the way. And then later on in this chapter the citizens will riot against the way.

And if you remember two weeks ago, Apollos was said to be instructed in the way of the Lord. So the way then is just another way of describing discipleship or Christianity.

Anyway, in the face of this opposition, Paul, just like he did in Corinth, took the disciples somewhere else outside of the synagogue. So we read, Paul left them, took the disciples with him and had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus.

This went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord. Now again we see that growing churches takes time.

Many chapters ago in Antioch, Paul taught for a whole year. Remember I talked about their Bible school for a year. Then in Corinth it was 18 months.

[3 : 50] And now here in Ephesus, the longest of all, two years. But this was also a strategic move by Paul because Ephesus was an important city.

As the capital of the province of Asia, Ephesus saw many people coming and going from it. And so being based there allowed Paul to reach out in his ministry beyond the wall of the city itself.

Now because Paul was teaching daily in the lecture hall, what was likely to have happened was that he probably didn't venture much beyond the city itself. So you might ask, how did all the Jews and Greeks in Asia come to here?

Well, probably because the people traveling to Ephesus came and heard him and then going back, they would have spread the word back to their hometowns. Then in verse 11, we also read that Paul's ministry of the word was publicly affirmed by God through miracles.

And this is a further sign of God's spirit at work. So we read on the slide, God did extraordinary miracles through Paul so that even handkerchiefs and aprons that had been touched by him were taken to the sick and their illnesses were cured and the evil spirits left them.

[5 : 08] Now again, these miracles are very similar to the ones that we saw when Jesus himself did miracles in his ministry. And then later on, in Jerusalem, the healer and the apostles had miracles, signs and wonders accompany their teaching as well.

Now the first thing to pick up on this couple of verses here is that God is the one at work through Paul, isn't it? Very clear. The same way that he's working through Paul's preaching is also the way that he works through miracles.

Both the word of the Lord and miracles go together. And like a prophet in the Old Testament, God is using Paul's miracles to attest to him as his prophet, preaching his word, authenticating the word as it were.

So the miracles are not to be seen to be independent of the word. That's why they're mentioned together. That's why the word precedes the miracles. Second, these signs are given because Paul's ministry in one sense is groundbreaking.

He was God's specially chosen apostle to the Gentiles. He's planting churches in places where the gospel had not taken root before. Now, that's not the case with us today, is it?

[6 : 23] When we do our ministry, when we share with others about the Lord Jesus, it's not that God's Spirit is no longer with us. We don't have the signs, but we shouldn't be expecting the miracles because what we're doing in one sense is not groundbreaking.

We've got a long history, don't we, here in this church of many people doing ministry here. And third, when it comes to the aprons and the handkerchiefs, they're very impressive, isn't it?

To see how these aprons and handkerchiefs have such miraculous power. But their power to heal is meant to be seen as mirroring the way the word is spreading.

It's a mirror, it's a sort of alignment. Because just as the word was spreading in Asia without Paul having to be physically present for that word to have its impact, so were the miracles.

People were healed and evil spirits were cast out without Paul being physically there, without Paul needing to be there. That's the point of what Luke is trying to say.

[7 : 29] All it took was for Paul to have touched these garments. But in both cases, we're meant to see that it is actually God who is powerfully at work.

Through Paul, yes, but with or without his presence. All of it to say that it is actually God's Word that is powerful.

It is God's Spirit that is the one that transforms. Not Paul himself. Whether it's word or sign, God's Spirit is the one that works. But in all these cases, the word goes hand in hand with the miracles, as I said earlier.

You see, I think that if the people were returning to their towns transformed by the word, and some of them would have been healed themselves by Paul, you know, they wouldn't have just been saying, look, just touch my handkerchief, right?

No, they would have been sharing about the Lord Jesus. That's the most important thing to them, isn't it? And then as they were doing that, and then perhaps offering that handkerchief or that apron to be touched, it was only because these people who touched believed that they were healed.

[8 : 40] Believed in the word and therefore healed of their sickness. So, I believe that faith in Jesus, therefore, was required for them to be healed.

Now, the other thing about this, of course, is that it's also a demonstration, isn't it, of God's grace. Because these people were too sick, were they? To travel that far to Ephesus to hear and be saved.

Instead, what God was doing was coming out to them by His Spirit. God was being gracious to them. They were unable to come out and God said, look, I will come to you.

You don't have to come to Ephesus in order to hear the word of salvation. You can hear where you are. Be saved and be healed. And so, all of this whole description here, I think, is neatly summarized at the end of this section.

So, if you jump to verse 20, there it says, In this way, the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power.

[9 : 40] That's a concise but very clear summary, isn't it? God's Spirit is at work through the word of the Lord spreading and growing in power.

Now, how else is this growing power of the word spreading? Well, come back again to verse 13 where we left off. And this time, we will see it at work in relation to the name of Jesus.

And so, verse 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.

So, it would seem that exorcism was a kind of a real job in those days. These were ancient ghostbusters.

Right? So, imagine you see these Jews going around working hard, driving out spirits. They probably, you know, didn't have a perfect success rate.

[10 : 37] You know, hit and miss maybe. Sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn't. And then, along comes Paul and they see that, you know what, Paul, he gets it all the time.

He's got a hundred percent success rate. Now, what's his secret weapon? Well, then they think, I know, he uses Jesus' name all the time.

That must be it. You know what? Let's give that a go. But notice, they don't have their own faith, do they? For it says, they would say, in the name of Jesus, whom Paul preaches, I command you to come out.

So, Jesus is the Messiah Paul believed in, not us. And you know what? Evil spirits may be evil, but they're not dumb, are they?

They may not worship Jesus, but they know who Jesus is. And they know who submits truly to Jesus. And so, they're compelled, really, to answer, to submit only to Jesus' legitimate servants.

[11 : 46] They're not going to obey just because someone uses Jesus' name. So, when some sons of Sceva try to do it, it doesn't work. One day, the evil spirit answered them as they tried, Jesus I know, and Paul I know about, but who are you?

Then the man who had the evil spirit jumped on them and overpowered them all. One man, seven sons, no match. He gave them such a beating that they ran out of the house naked and bleeding.

And that's a contrast, isn't it, with Paul himself, just one man, and the evil spirit submitting to the name of the Lord. Now, by contrast, if you look in verse 17, what we see is the right fear, the right kind of fear of the Lord.

So, on the slide, 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. Now, here we see the spirit at work again, not just healing people, but causing people, more importantly, to revere the name of the Lord Jesus.

And so, instead of just invoking the name of Jesus without faith, these Jews and Greeks held his name in high honor because of their faith.

[13 : 03] And how is this demonstrated? Verse 18. Through faith and repentance. Many of those who believed now came and openly confessed what they had done.

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 50,000 drachma. Now, one drachma is actually a day's wage in those days.

If you look at the footnote, you'll be able to see that in your Bible. So, anyway, I did some calculations. I looked at the average weekly earnings in Australia today.

These scrolls were actually worth \$13.1 million. AUD, Aussie dollars. In today's value. Alright? So, if you think about it, that's pretty valuable, isn't it?

You can buy five or six houses with that thing. Maybe more. But they were valuable, right? These scrolls. And they were valuable because these were actually tools of the trade for these sorcerers, aren't they?

[14 : 12] They had money-making potential. It's like, you know, a pastor burning his common trees. Or if you're a lawyer, you're burning all your legal sort of legislation that's, you know, you know how they always have those Zoom meetings and then the lawyers always have their volumes of legislation down the back, you know, to show this is how much I know kind of thing.

They're burning all those. Now, of course, today, with the internet and all that, that doesn't really matter. But that's what it was, isn't it? They're burning their tools of trade. So, what they did really was a mark of true repentance, wasn't it?

They were turning away from their past life of sin, even to the point of giving up their livelihood. And that's a big deal, isn't it? Because if you think about it, what are they then now going to do for a living?

They've got to work it out, don't they? They can't rely on sorcery anymore. But no, for them, following Jesus, because they've heard who he is, was more important than even their livelihood.

And I wonder whether the word of the Lord has had the same impact in your life. So that your life has been transformed by the Spirit and then you obey and repent and follow Jesus.

[15 : 32] Now, I'm sure, if you're a disciple of Jesus, then that's exactly what would have happened. Because that's the power of God's word, isn't it? Even if it comes at a personal cost to you, when we believe in Jesus, his word compels us, doesn't it, to faith and obedience.

Even if it means giving up the most precious things in our lives, like these one-time sorcerers and their lucrative trade. And of course, the financial security that comes with it.

No, all of that is not worth as much as following Jesus. Now, of course, the opposite can happen as well, isn't it? The word of the Lord can so threaten us that we respond like we're going to see now in the next section, like Demetrius and the other silversmiths.

So now we're going to turn to verse 23 in your Bibles, where the impact of the word now is not just touching individual lives, as with the sorcerers, but it's starting to have a big impact on the society as well.

Now, because of the length of the passage, I didn't get Tiff to read it earlier. So I'm going to do that now, and then we're going to make some observations along the way. And because of the time, we're not going to be able to cover everything in detail, although if you follow it along, it's quite an interesting story.

[16 : 51] So verse 23, about that time, there arose a great disturbance about the way. A silversmith named Demetrius, who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought in a lot of business for the craftsmen there.

He called them together, along with the workers in related trades, and said, you know, my friends, that we receive a good income from this business. And you see, and here this fellow Paul has convinced and led astray large numbers of people here in Ephesus, and in practically the whole province of Asia.

He says that gods made by human hands are no gods at all. There is danger, not only that our trade will lose its good name, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be discredited.

And the goddess herself, who is worshipped throughout the province of Asia and the world, will be robbed of her divine majesty. And when they heard this, they were furious and began shouting, great is Artemis of the Ephesians.

And soon the whole city was in an uproar. The people seized Gaius and Aristarchus, Paul's traveling companions from Macedonia, and all of them rushed into the theater together.

[18 : 01] This is not the cinema, by the way. This is the empty theater. Paul wanted to appear before the crowd, 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 assembly was in confusion. Some were shouting one thing, some another. Most of the people did not even know why they were there. The Jews in the crowd pushed Alexander to the front, and they shouted instructions to him.

He motioned for silence in order to make a defense before the people. But when they realized that he was a Jew, they all shouted in unison for about two hours. Great is Artemis of the Ephesians.

And what time is it now? 5.47. So think about this. 7.47 before they finish. So two hours. It's clear, isn't it, that Artemis, one of the Greek goddesses, was to Ephesus an important figure, wasn't it?

An important god. Ephesus was the guardian of her temple. And there was a sort of symbiotic relationship going on here. Because the Ephesians worshipped her, but in turn, their worship made for a good source of income.

[19 : 19] It was good for business, isn't it? Good for the economic activity of the city. And among these are the silver shrines that they would make, which people would keep.

And they were making a lot of them to keep them in business. But as the word of the Lord was growing in power in the city, that was bad business.

It was bad for the local economy. And we've seen that before, haven't we? Previously in Acts. How the coming of Jesus is bad business for some people. Now imagine, just by comparison, imagine the Yarra Valley without wineries.

Or the Gold Coast without its theme parks. Or Mount Hotham without its ski lifts. That's Ephesus without Artemis.

That's what it's like to have Ephesus without Artemis. And so you know, Demetrius, he was not a silly guy, was he? He could see the writing on the wall for his business.

[20 : 25] And he was astute. He could see it. And so he rallied his fellow artisans and got the guild or, you know, a union of silversmiths or whatever they were called in those days. And he said, look, look, we need to protest.

Workers of the precious metals unite. Right? Now we won't go into the ins and outs of all that happened. But eventually, we see that a city clerk comes in to try and quieten the crowd.

And so he makes his appeal in verse 35. And so this is what he says. Fellow Ephesians, doesn't all the world know that the city of Ephesus is the guardian of the temple of the great Artemis and of her image, which fell from heaven?

Therefore, since these facts are undeniable, you ought to calm down and not do anything rash. You have brought these men here, though they have neither robbed temples nor blasphemed our goddess.

Since then, Demetrius and his fellow craftsmen have a grievance against anybody. The courts are open and there are pro-councils. They can press charges if there's anything further you want to bring up.

[21 : 27] It must be settled in a legal assembly. As it is, we are in danger of being charged with rioting because of what happened today. In that case, we will not be able to account for this commotion since there is no reason for it.

And after he had said this, he dismissed the assembly. Well, what he does is successful in averting the violence and the commotion. But I have to say that while his words were persuasive to the people there at the time, ironically, actually, it's actually not true, is it?

You see, he was trying to persuade these silversmiths to believe that Artemis is so great that she cannot be overthrown. So, you know, just calm down. Great is Artemis of Ephesus.

And you don't have to keep shouting because there's no danger of that, of Artemis being dethroned. Because, you know, what can this Paul and his Jesus really do anyway? But if you think about it, actually, the reality is the actual opposite, isn't it?

Because quietly but surely, the word of the Lord was having its impact on the city of Ephesus, wasn't it? And why else were they afraid of losing their business?

[22 : 44] They were probably seeing their cash takings dropping week by week, wouldn't they? When fewer and fewer people were buying their silver coins. People were, indeed, turning away from Artemis and following Jesus.

And so, the Lord, he doesn't need to show his power by robbing Artemis' temple or blaspheming her. No, the Lord shows his power simply through the preaching of the word of the Lord to make the name of Jesus known.

This is the powerful and effective means by which God brings about his will. That's it, isn't it? And, you know, it's exactly as Jetty read in our Isaiah passage today, isn't it?

When God declares that the word that goes out from his mouth, the word of the Lord, through his messengers like Paul, will always accomplish what he desires. It will achieve the purpose for which he sent it.

Now, friends, as we look out in our city of Melbourne, maybe even just here, Doncaster, I wonder whether you, like me, we long to have God do that same transformative work in our city as he was doing in Ephesus.

[24 : 07] Well, we've seen in our passage today how God works. It's not a magic formula, is it, in one sense. It's just the faithful preaching and spreading of God's word, isn't it?

So that the name of Jesus may be held in high honour. Now, of course, that's a miracle in itself, isn't it? Because it is God's spirit alone that can work to do that work.

But apart from it, it's not that, in one sense, that hard, is it? In Ephesus, all it took was a lecture hall.

You know, I imagine, I don't know what kind of lecture hall it was in those days, and whether Tyrannus was a big shot or whatever, but I imagine like a scout hall, right? Just four walls.

I don't even know whether there's heating or toilets or whatever. Pretty basic. But then, all we had was Paul in there, faithfully teaching year by year, day by day.

[25 : 07] Over two years. And what we see is individual hearts and lives changed. People repenting and believing.

And then slowly but surely, that having a knock-on impact, so that the city and beyond come to hear the word of the Lord as well, isn't it? And that is how the great and mighty Artemis of Ephesus was overthrown.

And so that's the same with us, isn't it? Even here right now, it is by the faithful but life-changing ministry of the word, that God will bring down the idols in our city.

The unseen idols. Things we hold more dear to ourselves than the Lord himself. And so I want to encourage us just to keep being faithful of that.

It doesn't seem very spectacular when we come and open God's word just to read it. In our growth groups on Wednesday, one-to-one Bible reading. But that is the means by which God's spirit works in power.

[26 : 11] And if you are here today, and you're still seeking and searching out the truth about Christianity, then let me encourage you. Don't underestimate the impact of just opening the Bible, maybe going to one of the Gospels and just reading it.

Because that is the word of the Lord speaking. And God's spirit works through that word. Now many of you might be familiar with the Chronicle of Narnia.

And you might recall that in one of the, I think it's the magician's nephew, I think that's the one. You might recall that Aslan the lion, he sings Narnia into existence, doesn't he?

Remember the first, as he starts singing one particular tune, the land becomes green with grass and then he changes its tune and the trees begin to sprout and then another tune and the flowers bloom.

And then from the ground, humps start to develop and then you get animals, moles, dogs, stags, all kinds. And then as Aslan keeps singing out of the woods, you know, in that kind of story, mythical figures like dwarves and fawns start to emerge.

[27 : 24] Now, C.S. Lewis was writing allegorically, isn't he, of God's creation. Just like in Genesis, God's word brings about the creation of his world.

But that's the same as well with the new creation. That is our life, our eternal life. It is by his word that he breathes eternal life into each of us.

That's the life-changing power of his word. His word. And by hearing it and then repenting and believing in it and putting our faith in Jesus, we come alive, don't we?

In the spirit. And that's how we keep growing. By keeping to hearing the word of the Lord and allowing it to spread among us and in us.

And as we do and go out as his disciples, then we begin to impact society around us. But again, by God's life-changing word.

[28 : 25] That's the thing that will transform our communities, our cities, so that more and more people become believers in Jesus themselves. So I want to encourage us just to hold our nerve on that and to keep doing it.

Not to be afraid of it. But the simple but powerful ministry of faithfully spreading the word of the Lord. That's how God uses.

That's how God's spirit works to change his world and bring people into his kingdom. Let's pray. Father, we read and we marvel at how your word spread in Ephesus and how it grew in power so that the name of Jesus was held in high honor.

Father, please, Lord, may that be true in our own lives. May it be true in the life of our church. And may it be true as we see this impact in our community, in our city, and indeed in the whole world.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.