

The Gospel Prevails in Ephesus Acts 19:8-41

Introduction

I once had a friend who when asked how things were going often replied, “Smoothly by jerks”

By that response he meant that he was on a steady trajectory even though his progress was intermittent

I would imagine most of us have had that same experience at one time or another in our own lives

Where we know we’re making progress but only by fits and starts as life often seems to follow the pattern of taking one step forward and two steps backward – sometimes it can be hard to stay the course

We have seen that Paul’s ministry was a series of ups and downs as he saw the gospel received by some and rejected by others

He has been welcomed and run out of town, hailed as a god and stoned as a heretic, he has baptized new believers and had his wounds washed after being beaten and imprisoned, his message has inspired saving faith and hateful jealousy

And still Paul remained true to his calling and committed to the task of making disciples through sharing the gospel, welcoming new believers to the faith, planting churches and strengthening them through teaching the Word of God

Paul persisted in spite of hardship because he determined to be faithful to the task he had been given and he was successful because God’s Word is powerful to fulfill its purpose as we read in **Hebrews 4:12** –

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

And Paul knew that his message would win the day in spite of hardship because God’s Word would prevail over whatever evil was arrayed against it

Jesus told his disciples in **Luke 21:33** – “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.”

Paul has travelled many miles to this point in his ministry

He is engaged in we know as his third missionary journey and in our passage this morning we find him in the city of Ephesus in Asia Minor or modern day Turkey

Once again we are going to see that Paul meets with a mixture of success and failure in his ministry in Ephesus

And we are going to see that the gospel continues to prevail even if makes its progress smoothly by jerks

Please open your Bibles to Acts 19 if you haven’t already done so as we will be looking at verses 8-41 this morning

In these verses we are going to see that **the gospel prevails in spite of:**

Stubborn Disobedience, Superficial Imitation, and Stirred-up Hostility

I use the present tense of the verb “prevails” because the gospel still overcomes these oppositions today

And we will encounter each of them as we take the gospel out into our spheres of influence so this passage informs us as to the power of the gospel and shows us that we need not fear – the gospel will continue to prevail

As we begin we will see Paul carries on with his typical formula of going first to the synagogue to present the gospel message to his fellow Jews before taking his message to the Gentiles

Follow along as I read **Acts 19:8-10** where we will see that **the gospel prevails in spite of stubborn disobedience**

I. Stubborn Disobedience (8-10)

*8*And he entered the synagogue and for three months spoke boldly, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God. *9*But when some became stubborn and continued in unbelief, speaking evil of the Way before the congregation, he withdrew from them and took the disciples with him, reasoning daily in the hall of Tyrannus. *10*This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.

Looking back at chapter **18:19** we see that when Paul had previously passed through Ephesus he had also gone to the synagogue to reason with the Jews

And as we have seen before, this means that he opened up the Old Testament and showed them the prophecies regarding the Messiah and then revealed how Jesus of Nazareth fulfilled those prophecies showing logically that Jesus was the Messiah

And in **18:20** we see that the Jews were so receptive of what he was showing them that they asked him to stay longer

But he was determined to return to Antioch so he left but now he is back and doing the exact same thing

And he again appears to have gotten a good reception as **19:8** tells us he remained three months telling them about the kingdom of God

However, as we often see in life, all good things must come to an end and in **verse 9** we see that in time opposition to the gospel began to raise its ugly head and there were **three stages to the opposition**

Three stages of opposition to the gospel:

First, we see that some became dug in against it,

That's what Luke is conveying by his use of the word "stubborn"

They hardened themselves against allowing it to penetrate their hearts

When used in a medical sense the word Luke used carries the meaning of becoming thick against something repetitive like the body forming a callus to combat a constant source of friction or pressure

And whereas they had once desired to hear Paul's message in time some formed a spiritual callus against it

Hebrews 3:7-8 speaks to that reality as we see the warning –

Therefore as the Holy Spirit says, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion..."

The gospel message is an irritant to the unbeliever because it demands an acknowledgement and a response

And while the gospel makes some people tender and respond favorably; others become hardened and resist

Then having become impervious to the gospel we see next that:

They determined to disobey it,

There is more here than not believing this is willful, active disobedience

In speaking to the Jews about the kingdom of God Paul undoubtedly shared more than just how to be saved and told them all that God requires of mankind – what a life that is pleasing to God looks like

And while it's one thing to sin in ignorance; to decide to reject the clear commands of God and to determine to go one's own way is another

James wrote the following about willful disobedience in his epistle (**James 4:17**)

So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.

But the natural progression to refusing to be impacted by God's Word is to begin to willfully do the opposite of what God requires

And refusing to believe and to put one's trust in the saving work of Jesus is the ultimate act of disobedience against God – and that's exactly what some of the Jews did in spite of Paul's clear and ongoing presentation

Clearly, the Jews had heard the truth, hardened themselves to it and decided to disobey what they knew to be God's desire

But that's not all and their opposition had one final stage to it:

They began to verbally denounce it

Eventually they began to speak out to others against Paul's teaching of the Word of God and the lifestyle that results from its acceptance

Not content to merely do harm to themselves those in opposition began to verbally oppose Paul's teaching publicly

This means they in all likelihood were disruptive and began to openly challenge Paul and to heckle him as he was speaking in the synagogue

We see this activity occurring with some frequency outside the walls of the church today as the goal of many is to disrupt the speeches of those they disagree with to keep them from communicating their message effectively

Again, it's the natural progression of opposition to try to stop the spread of information that one is opposed to

And some of the Jews having decided to close themselves off from Paul's teaching and then to openly, willfully disobey it, it's no wonder that in the end they set out to speak against it

Paul's message about the kingdom of God was not just about how to be saved but how to live in order to please God as is shown by the second mention of "the Way" which points to a purposeful way of life

And I'm sure you've noticed that when someone is committed to engaging in an ungodly activity or lifestyle they can't bear to even let the other side be known

Complete intolerance is the logical destination when a person heads down the path of opposition to God

And when Paul saw that these Jews were fully engaged in open rebellion to the gospel he moved on

And we should do the same when we reach an obvious impasse because there is a sense that we are wasting our time and energy –

It becomes a matter of stewardship and it's proper to take the message elsewhere once it's been rejected

The hall of Tyrannus

When you imagine the difficulty of trying to teach in a church setting with a heckler in the crowd you can see why Paul decided to move his ministry outside the synagogue

Just exactly what the role of this man Tyrannus was is unknown

Some think he was a lecturer who taught his students in a lecture hall while others think he may have been the owner of the lecture hall

The fact that the name he was known by means "tyrant" says something about what type of man he likely was

We have to hope it was a nickname and not the name his parents gave him or else he must have been a very special sort of child too

Anyway, the custom of the day was for people to work from about 7am to 11am then to take a siesta until 4pm when they would return to work until late evening – in that way they would avoid the heat of the day

And extra-biblical literature claims that Paul taught in the hall of Tyrannus during these five hours when the hall would have been available

This means that Paul likely got up and worked as a tentmaker from 7 to 11am and then taught until 4pm and that he did this for two years

And Luke writes that the result was that “all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks”

The opposing Jews couldn't stop the spread of the Word of God – in fact they actually facilitated it because Paul enjoyed a wider audience outside the synagogue than he ever could have within its confines

Clarifications

There are two matters I want to clear up real quickly

First, when Luke says “all the residents” he doesn't mean every single person in the entire region

He means that there was no place in the region that didn't hear the Word of God – it spread throughout Asia

And he doesn't mean to imply that all of those people passed through the hall of Tyrannus at some point during those two years and heard Paul speak

Rather, it seems obvious that people were saved and taught there and then they took the message with them

The book of Revelation mentions seven churches in what was known at that time as Asia and Ephesus is just one of them

And we have no record of Paul visiting some of those cities so those churches must have been planted by other believers and quite probably believers who were the spiritual offspring of Paul's ministry in Ephesus

It's plain to see that the gospel prevailed in spite of stubborn disobedience

II. Superficial Imitation (11-20)

The next section we will consider is verses 11-20 and there are some admittedly odd things found here

Let's look first at **verses 11-12**

11And God was doing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, 12so 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.

During the course of our study we have already seen God repeatedly validate the message of the apostles with signs and wonders so it's not particularly unusual to see him do so again here

What is a little disconcerting at first is the idea that items that Paul had touched brought healing to the afflicted and the possessed

It reminds us what we saw in **Acts 5:15** where people brought the sick into the streets in hope that Peter's shadow might fall on them and they would be healed

In this case it seems that people were stealing the cloths that Paul used to wipe away sweat and his work aprons and taking them to effectively benefit people who were sick and demon possessed

Admittedly, the whole idea seems a little bizarre until we really consider what was going on here

First, the handkerchiefs and aprons and really, or even Paul, actually healed no one

Luke says rightly that God was doing the miracles "by the hands of Paul" so any healing was according to the power and grace of God

Second, Luke says that these miracles were "extraordinary" which means they were special even among miracles and not in any way normative – they were for a particular time, place, and circumstance

Third, the miracles were for the validation of Paul's message just as all of the miracles we've seen so far have been
Miracles never stand alone and they always come after the message has been given

Fourth, unlike the charlatans who today hawk trinkets for healing, Paul wasn't seeking to have these objects used for this purpose – I can imagine him constantly looking for his shop towels and work aprons when he showed up for work

Then lastly, the people of Ephesus were largely from pagan backgrounds and their understanding was that they could be healed in this way so they demonstrated faith in Paul's God by taking the items and using them

So God in his grace rewarded their sincere faith by giving them what they sought because the object of their faith was correct even though it was pursued in an odd manner

We see a very similar situation with the woman in Luke 8 who touched the hem of Jesus' garment seeking healing from her bleeding disorder – Jesus told her in **Luke 8:48** "*Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace.*"

So, in the end the event described here isn't that shocking although we shouldn't expect it to be repeated

What it led to however is interesting and kind of amusing because we see that the gospel prevailed in spite of **superficial imitation**

Look with me at **verses 13-20** –

13Then 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." 14Seven sons of a Jewish high priest named Sceva were doing this. 15But the evil spirit answered them, "Jesus I know, and Paul I recognize, but who are you?" 16And the man in whom was the evil spirit leaped on them, mastered all of them and overpowered them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded. 17And 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. 18 Also many of those who were now believers came, confessing and divulging their practices. *19* And a number of those who had practiced magic arts brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all. And they counted the value of them and found it came to fifty thousand pieces of silver. *20* So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily.

While Paul wasn't seeking to profit from the miracles that God was doing through him some saw an opportunity for monetary gain

In those days the thought was that demons could be exorcised by invoking the name of a powerful individual

So when these Jewish exorcists heard Paul preaching the name of Jesus and saw the miracles they thought they had come upon a real goldmine – they would simply add the name of Jesus to their list of powerful names and use it to make money

What happened to these charlatans provides a bit of comic relief as they show up and invoke the name of Jesus as they command the evil spirit who had indwelt their customer to vacate

Only to have the evil spirit admit to knowing Jesus and Paul but not these seven men who didn't personally know Jesus either

Jesus had power over demons and Paul had the power of Jesus working through him but these seven had nothing

Sometimes a handful of nothing is a pretty cool hand but not in this case

And we see that the evil spirit used the body of the man it inhabited to thrash the seven phony exorcists so badly – even stripping them of their clothing so they had to run out of the house naked – what a humiliating defeat!

You would have to think that these men were successful at least some of the time or they wouldn't have much of a business but when they tried to counterfeit the miracles of God they failed miserably

It wasn't long before word of their thrashing got all around town with the result being reverential fear for God and the magnification of the name of Jesus

Believers dabbling in the dark arts

Back in the 1970s there was a man who became quite famous claiming to be a mentalist

He called himself The Amazing Kreskin and he was all the rage as he appeared to have ESP or extrasensory perception

My folks were rather new believers at the time and I remember they got us a kind of Amazing Kreskin game that was really supposed to be more of a kit to discover and train those who used in harnessing their own ESP

Of course it was all phony and Kreskin was like all the others who came before and after but we tried to harness the power of a mentalist until we got bored with it and abandoned it

It's not at all uncommon for new believers to carry on with practices that God desires them to abandon and we see that was true in Ephesus

In **verse 18** we read that many of the new believers were still dabbling in the magic arts and when the seven sons of Sceva got whooped they woke up and confessed what they were doing

But they went further than merely confessing and they brought their magic books together and publicly burned them

Archeologists have found similar books from this time period and they contain incantations and names that were thought to contain power when recited in a specific way

Consequently, the books were quite valuable – we are told the value of the burned books was 50,000 pieces of silver

When you consider that a piece of silver was the standard for a day's wage you begin to understand just what burning them meant to these new believers

I looked up the current average daily wage here in the U.S. and according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics it is \$24.57 per hour

So \$24.57 multiplied by an 8-hour day gives us \$196.56 per day which when multiplied by 50,000 comes to just over \$9.8 million!

Those new believers were serious about not offending God!

And as they honored God we see that *“the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily”*

People noticed the unique power of God’s Word and they noticed the changed lives of those who believed

Charlatans and cults abound today so we should strive to lead lives so that people can’t help but notice the difference between being a genuine Christ-follower and merely invoking the name of Jesus for spurious ends

That’s what the believers in Ephesus did and the gospel prevailed in spite of superficial imitation

Short Intermission (21-22)

Verses 21-22 seem to be a little out of place as Luke interrupts the flow of his narrative to give us an update on Paul's future plans

21 Now after these events Paul resolved in the Spirit to pass through Macedonia and Achaia and go to Jerusalem, saying, "After I have been there, I must also see Rome." 22 And having sent into Macedonia two of his helpers, Timothy and Erastus, he himself stayed in Asia for a while.

Looking at a map of the region shows that Paul's planned route has him travelling to the northwest and then south through Macedonia and Achaia before heading back to the southeast to Jerusalem and then way to the west-northwest past Ephesus again to Rome

It makes little sense that he would take such a circuitous route until we realize that Paul's plan was to take up a collection from the churches in Macedonia and Achaia to carry to the church in Jerusalem

The passage Roxanne read for us earlier spoke of this collection as does **Romans 15:25-27** –

At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints. 26 For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. 27 For they were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings.

Presumably he sent Timothy and Erastus ahead to make preparations for the collection of the offering

But Paul remained behind in Ephesus for the time being and it was during this time that the next opposition to the gospel took place

And we see that the gospel prevails in spite of stirred up hostility toward it

Look with me at **verses 23-41**

III. Stirred-up Hostility (23-41)

23About that time there arose no little disturbance concerning the Way. **24**For a man named Demetrius, a silversmith, who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought no little business to the craftsmen. **25**These he gathered together, with the workmen in similar trades, and said, "Men, you know that from this business we have our wealth. **26**And you see and hear that not only in Ephesus but in almost all of Asia this Paul has persuaded and turned away a great many people, saying that gods made with hands are not gods. **27**And there is danger not only that this trade of ours may come into disrepute but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis may be counted as nothing, and that she may even be deposed from her magnificence, she whom all Asia and the world worship."

28When they heard this they were enraged and were crying out, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" **29**So the city was filled with the confusion, and they rushed together into the theater, dragging with them Gaius and Aristarchus, Macedonians who were Paul's companions in travel. **30**But when Paul wished to go in among the crowd, the disciples would not let him. **31**And even some of the Asiarchs, who were friends of his, sent to him and were urging him not to venture into the theater. **32**Now some cried out one thing, some another, for the assembly was in confusion, and most of them did not know why they had come together. **33**Some of the crowd prompted Alexander, whom the Jews had put forward. And Alexander, motioning with his hand, wanted to make a defense to the crowd. **34**But when they recognized that he was a Jew, for about two hours they all cried out with one voice, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!"

35And when the town clerk had quieted the crowd, he said, "Men of Ephesus, who is there who does not know that the city of the Ephesians is temple keeper of the great Artemis, and of the sacred stone that fell from the sky? **36**Seeing then that these things cannot be denied, you ought to be quiet and do nothing rash. **37**For you have brought these men here who are neither sacrilegious nor blasphemers of our goddess. **38**If therefore Demetrius and the craftsmen with him have a complaint against anyone, the courts are open, and there are proconsuls. Let them bring charges against one another. **39**But if you seek anything further, it shall be settled in the regular assembly. **40**For we really are in danger of being charged with rioting today, since there is no cause that we can give to justify this commotion." **41**And when he had said these things, he dismissed the assembly.

Once again we see opposition to the gospel based on economic concerns as Demetrius riles up the other craftsmen

As the center for worship of the goddess Artemis, Ephesus provided a burgeoning trade in objects of worship like the little shrines that a silversmith like Demetrius would have produced

Of course it would seem overly selfish to frame the rebellion only on the grounds that our wallets will be adversely affected so Demetrius bolstered his argument by bringing cultural identity and its preservation into it

Demetrius rightly pointed out that the reputation of the craftsmen was tied to that of Artemis and if she fell into disrepute so would they

After all the city had just witnessed the burning of a fortune in magic books as those who turned to Christ rid themselves of their influence – the craftsmen might very well be next

In fact, he pointed out that the whole way of life in Ephesus was in danger of being destroyed because if Artemis went down Ephesus would lose all its influence because people would stop coming to visit her temple

Demetrius' claim that this "Way", this manner of life, that Paul was preaching put their economic well-being in danger and threatened their personal and civic reputations was enough to incite the mob to take action

Luke characterizes the mob as being "enraged" and somewhat comically as confused because they didn't even know precisely what they were upset about

The details of the account are plain to see as the mob did what mobs do – they milled around, yelled, and threatened violence

They also refused to listen to anyone who they thought would have a contrary opinion as they shouted down Alexander simply because they recognized him as being Jewish without hearing what he might have to say

But finally the town clerk, who would be something like a mayor today, was able to address the crowd and get them to disperse

Of course, he was dead wrong in his core argument by stating that the importance of Artemis was so well established that there was nothing to fear from Christianity but his point about raising the ire of the Romans was spot on

God fights his own battles

I skipped over the part where Paul was prevented from going in to address the mob but it shows us a couple of things

First, Paul enjoyed the support of at least some of the civil authorities as they are said to be his friends and they demonstrated care for his well-being

This shows us the importance of making friends outside the church because we never know when we might benefit from having an advocate who knows the territory of the pagan world better than we do

But **second**, I think it shows once again that God is capable of fighting his own battles and sometimes the best thing we can do is let the unbelievers dispute with each other

We saw that when Paul was before Gallio and he refused to even entertain the charges the Jews brought against Paul and in this case the city clerk testified to the innocence of the Christians

The Asiarchs prevented Paul from rushing needlessly into a potentially dangerous situation and the town clerk defused the situation in such a way that the innocence of the gospel was once again affirmed by an unbeliever

Too often we rush to defend Scripture when we might well be better off waiting and letting things play out because many of those negative situations will self-correct if we were to wait

God's Word is powerful and we really don't need to defend it – we need to rightly handle it and expound it but we don't need to defend its integrity or its truth

The gospel prevails in spite of stirred up hostility against it

Conclusion

It doesn't take a great deal of creativity to see how each of these oppositions to the gospel appear today

All around us we see people who are stubbornly refusing to even entertain the gospel message and who seem bound and determined to disobey whatever the Bible says

And if you doubt that people are willing to verbally denounce God and his Word just spend some time on the internet

We know that there are just as many cults that come just close enough to Christianity to deceive people into following their teachings

And the news reveals that hatred for Christianity is in many ways even more rampant today than in Paul's day

Yet we see that the gospel prevails in spite of stubborn disobedience, superficial imitation, and stirred-up violence

God says in **Isaiah 55:10-11** –

“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”

That passage is often quoted in regards to God's Word being ultimately successful in leading people to a saving knowledge of his Son – and it does that

But we need to also accept that there are times when God's Word hardens hearts and we need to accept that may be the purpose God intended

People need to hear the gospel regardless of the outcome and it's our mission to share it

People really haven't changed all that much in the 2,000 years since Paul ministered in Ephesus and the message hasn't changed at all since Paul preached it and the gospel prevails today just as it did in Ephesus

As I close in prayer the worship team will make their way to the platform to lead us in hymn #727 – Faith is the Victory

Let's pray