

Derek French:

The events that surrounded Paul's stay in the city of Ephesus were quite remarkable, as we'll hear. And what's plainly obvious from what took place, God was very much at work in the lives of so many of the inhabitants.

We're in Acts chapter 19, verses 11 to 22, and again we've the help of Gerard and Phillippa Chrispin. Phillippa will read those verses for us and then Gerard will explain them.

Phillippa Chrispin:

*'Now God worked unusual miracles by the hands of Paul, so that even handkerchiefs or aprons were brought from his body to the sick, and the diseases left them and the evil spirits went out of them.*

*Then some of the itinerant Jewish exorcists took it upon themselves to call the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, "We exorcise you by the Jesus whom Paul preaches." Also there were seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, who did so. And the evil spirit answered and said, "Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are you?" Then the man in whom the evil spirit was leaped on them, overpowered them, and prevailed against them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded.*

*This became known both to all Jews and Greeks dwelling in Ephesus; and fear fell on them all, and the name of the Lord Jesus was magnified. And many who had believed came confessing and telling their deeds. Also, many of those who had practised magic brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all. And they counted up the value of them, and it totalled fifty thousand pieces of silver.*

*So the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed.*

*When these things were accomplished, Paul purposed in the Spirit, when he had passed through Macedonia and Achaia, to go to Jerusalem, saying, "After I have been there, I must also see Rome." So he sent into Macedonia two of those who ministered to him, Timothy and Erastus, but he himself stayed in Asia for a time.'*

Gerard Chrispin:

In one sense all miracles are 'unusual'. My dictionary says a miracle is 'an event that is contrary to the established laws of nature and attributed to a supernatural cause.' Put more simply it is an event that is impossible to achieve unless God intervenes to do it. By definition, that is 'unusual. Jesus conceived in the womb of Mary by the Holy Spirit, feeding the five thousand and then the seven thousand with hardly any food, raising Lazarus from death after four days, and the resurrection of Jesus from the dead nevermore to die (unlike Lazarus), are all examples of God's miraculous work.

But certain miracles, although 'impossible' scientifically unless done directly by God's almighty power, seem 'normal' or 'usual'. We get used to them in the Bible. For example, the sick were healed, the lame made to walk, the blind caused to see, and the demon-possessed liberated. They became 'usual miracles' that people expected from the Lord Jesus Christ, who was God in the flesh.

God also works similar miracles through His apostles to show the world that they are His chosen servants speaking with His authority. Their message must be trusted and acted upon.

God now works some 'unusual miracles by the hands of Paul'. He miraculously heals the sick and liberates the demon-possessed through their physical contact with handkerchiefs or aprons which Paul held or wore. 'Unusual' means that God works here in a manner we do not see elsewhere in Scripture. We are not told why.

In doing this for His own purposes, God doubly underlines that Paul is His servant. Paul's hearers had better believe his gospel or perish. That gospel teaches that to be saved from sin and judgement they must repent from sin and trust Jesus. This is a different emphasis from some of today's selfish and deceptive so-called 'evangelists' who try to profit from gullible audiences while pretending to imitate Paul's 'unusual miracles' and ask for payment for the privilege.

Self-promoting and self-seeking religious hypocrites and fraudsters are not new. Here we meet them preying on the early Christian church. Like Simon the sorcerer, whom we met in Acts 8, they seek to gain personal advantage by trying to acquire the spiritual power they see in an apostle, in this case Paul. They overlook that God's Spirit, the third Person of the Trinity, has sovereignly empowered Paul to glorify Jesus. Paul has turned from his sins, yielded his life to the Son of God who loved him and died for him, and come under the Spirit's personal daily control.

Here seven travelling Jews take it 'upon themselves' to call on Jesus' name to do their bidding, and so cast out evil spirits from others. These sons of a Jewish chief priest names Sceva, despite religious backgrounds, do not know Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour. They are not therefore indwelled by the Holy Spirit, and so lack His spiritual protection and help.

Their foolish attempt to prevail in Satan's domain by their own strength is a dangerous step too far. The evil spirit knows Jesus. They all do: God's very existence makes 'demons believe – and tremble'. Paul, as a man of God who trusts and shelters in His all-conquering Lord and Saviour, is known and respected by the evil spirit. But the demon has no such knowledge of or respect for these seven self-centred lost sinners. The man in whom the evil spirit resides receives huge satanic strength to overcome them all. He leaps on the seven, wounds their bodies and strips them of self-respect and clothing. They flee naked from the house, smashed and shamed.

Be warned! Never meddle with satanic things. Never experiment in spiritually dark areas. Beware of trusting so-called exorcists who falsely claim to have spiritual powers. Avoid and resist Ouija boards and such things, fortune telling, séances, tarot cards, mediums, astrology, subtle 'enjoyable' Halloween experiments, praying to and for the dead, and repeating words as mantras. Keep close to Christ and the Bible. Reject anything doubtful. Jesus told us to 'Watch and pray.' That is our loving Lord's command, not just His suggestion!

Have you noticed how God can use holy fear in the Bible to get man's attention and point him to trust in Christ? Here, as the news about Sceva's sons reaches both Jews and Greeks in Ephesus, fear falls on them. It heralds blessing ahead. The Bible says that 'the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom'. Here the fear of the Lord, which magnifies the name of the Lord Jesus as many come to Christ, starts with fear arising from the terrifying experience of the seven men who sinfully try to control the Holy Spirit and take the name of Jesus in vain for their own ends.

Where the fear of our holy God exists, repentance often follows. That is why the Christian preacher must make it clear that sinners have broken God's law and so stand under His eternal judgment unless they turn from that sin, seek His mercy and pardon, and put their trust in the Saviour who bore that judgment on the cross.

Those who repent and cast themselves on His mercy and grace are saved. That is why Ephesians who trust in Christ now come 'confessing and telling their deeds'. Many are affected. They come openly to burn their books about magic 'in the sight of all'. How different from Sceva's sons!

The Bible assures all who repent and come to God that 'If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.' That is how real personal repentance works. You must repent decisively like that in order to believe in Christ and be saved. That is why Jesus' gospel preaching from the start declared, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.'

Have you confessed and forsaken your sins and trusted in Jesus? Do you urge others to do so?

God's word is 'living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword'. Christ's gospel 'is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes', whether Jews or Greeks. Christian conversion uniquely shows how powerful the Bible is. When the changed lives of those who cast themselves on Christ for eternal life demonstrate that they are now 'born again', God's gracious power in the gospel gets hold of others too. The blessing can spread like wildfire. When God's word is believed, proclaimed, and obeyed we see the power of God's word in action. Salvation comes.

Paul does not rest on his laurels! After the staggering effect of the gospel in Ephesus, he is strengthened in his Spirit-led purpose to revisit Jerusalem, intending then to go to Rome. But first he will detour in Greece to visit Macedonia and Achaia again.

He sends two of his colleagues and fellow servants in the gospel, Timothy and Erastus, ahead of him while he stays 'in Asia for a time'. Here we see Paul's big heart: his concern for the poverty-stricken Christians in the Jerusalem church is the reason for his considerable detour. He will collect money for needy Jerusalem believers from generous Macedonian and Achaian Christians. He not only preaches the gospel. He cares for God's people too.

From now on Paul will increasingly concentrate on making his first visit to Rome. Rome is a strategic city and forms the geographical lynch-pin in Paul's strategy, both to reach out with the gospel in Rome, and also from Rome to Spain.

A Spirit-filled and gospel-centred man is keen to think and pray carefully how and where he can best serve the Lord. Serving Christ becomes a priority when Jesus takes first place in your life. Is He first in your life?