

GOD'S SAVING PURPOSES PREVAIL BY CREATING CONVERTED AND CONTAGIOUS CONGREGATIONS

Acts 19:8-22

INTRODUCTION

After church this morning many of us are going to be asked, “so what have you been up to?” While the details will vary, we will answer with a description of our living of life. We’ve gone to work, mowed our lawns, paid our bills, watched TV, ate meals, played video games, went on vacation, in short we’ll talk about living. What if you were able to ask God, “what have you been up to?”—what would he say? What has occupied his time and attention? God has told us what he’s been up to in the Bible. There are two things that God has been doing. First he has been running the universe. He’s caused the sun to rise and sent rain and fed the wild animals and caused crops to grow and directed the affairs of the nations and made sure the trash was picked up and the police did their job and sent tornadoes and hurricanes and earthquakes and ordained the death of every sparrow that has died and given life to thousands of people in the wombs of their mothers and given every breath that every human being has taken and ordained the deaths of other thousands of people and the list goes on and on. As the Psalmist says, “The Lord does whatever pleases him in the heavens and on the earth, in the seas and all their depths.” He is the only sovereign Lord of the universe who does his perfect will every day to sustain his universe and direct it to his appointed end.

But the second thing that God has been doing is described in the book of Acts. God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit has been working this past week to save all of his people out of all the nations of the earth. He has been doing this by and through his church. If you will remember in the first verse of the book of Acts Luke, the author introduces this book by telling us, “In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach...” The first book to which he refers is the gospel of Luke, that is, Luke’s biography of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. In that first volume Luke wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach during the days of his earthly life. Thus this second volume, the book of Acts, is the story of what Jesus, God the Son, continues to do and to teach. However now he is no longer physically present but he acts and teaches through his church, his people by the Holy Spirit. In what all consider to be the theme verse of the whole book of Acts, chapter 1, verse 8 Jesus says to his 11 apostles who are the foundation of his church, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” This book of Acts is the story of how the Triune God is saving all of his people out of all the nations of the earth by means of his church bearing witness to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus as we are empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Thus, while the book of Acts records the actions and words of human beings, the chief actor, the main protagonist in the book is the only true and living God. The aim of Luke in telling this story is to make it clear how God overcomes all obstacles and all human and demonic opposition to save all of his people. He is on a rescue mission of epic proportions to save a multitude of diverse people from hell and for heaven. The book of Acts records the first 50 years of God’s work to redeem his people following the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus so that we can see and rejoice in his mighty work and understand our part in that story.

What we have seen from the beginning of the book of Acts is that everywhere this message about Jesus has been proclaimed God has brought into existence converted and contagious congregations of Christians. The story began with 3000 men, women and children being converted to Christ, baptized with water and added to the church after Peter preached the first Christian sermon in Jerusalem. We are told as that church “devoted themselves to the apostles teaching, and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” that “the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.” This same pattern has repeated itself across the Roman Empire among all kinds of people. In our passage today we are witnessing the same thing. As we consider the story of what God did in the city of Ephesus and in Asia, the Roman province of which it was a

part we are looking at what God is doing right now in Janesville and across the face of this globe to redeem his people out of all the nations of the world.

MAIN POINT

The Triune God creates converted and contagious congregations by...

I. The persistent proclamation of the gospel (vv.8-10)

In verse 8 we are told that Paul spent three months in the Jewish synagogue in Ephesus boldly speaking about and reasoning with and seeking to persuade the Jewish people gathered there each week about the kingdom of God. That means that on at least 12 consecutive Saturdays and probably at other gatherings through the week Paul sought to persuade these Jewish people that Jesus is that descendant of David who God promised would come and establish his kingdom upon the earth forever. He was using their own Scriptures, what we know as the OT, to demonstrate that the human Jesus was the Messiah promised in the pages of the OT. He sought to convince these people that Jesus' death on the cross was not a tragic accident or the result of human cruelty but that God himself, Father, Son and Holy Spirit had planned since before he made the universe that the Son of God would take on human flesh and die upon that cross. The Triune God's plan was that this sinless son of David would die upon that Roman cross and thus take upon himself the full anger and wrath of God the Father against all the sins of all those who trusted in God's promise. Paul proclaimed to these Jewish men and women that God had proven that this was his Messiah by raising him from the dead. He taught them that this same Jesus was now seated at God's right hand and one day would return to fully establish God's kingdom on this earth.

Paul announced that this crucified and resurrected Jesus was the Savior of all who trust in him and that for every believer there was a full pardon for sin. God would accept and count as perfectly righteous everyone who believed in this Jesus and would make every believer a member of his eternal kingdom by his Spirit. Paul pleaded with these Jewish men and women that they be reconciled to God and enter into the kingdom of God so that when Jesus returned at the end of all things to destroy all the wicked forever in hell and to establish God's visible kingdom upon this earth in the new heavens and the new earth that they would be part of that kingdom and not shut out of it into the outer darkness where there is only weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Paul didn't beat around the bush. He didn't talk about how to have a good marriage or how to be good parents or how to manage your money or how to be the best you or how to be healthy or how to lobby the Roman government for better highways. He had one theme and that was to announce to these people, using the OT Scriptures that God had made a way for guilty rebels like them to be pardoned of their many sins by the great king of the universe and thus become full members of his kingdom. He labored week by week to show these people that their greatest problem was their own sins, their greatest danger was being excluded from God's kingdom because of their sins and the greatest news they could ever hear was that God, contrary to what they deserved had sent his son to do all the work so that if they would but trust in Jesus God's anger against them would be appeased and he would love them as his own sons and daughters forever.

At the end of those three months many within these Jewish congregations were hardened and refused to believe what Paul was saying and they began to publicly malign the way of salvation through Christ of which Paul was seeking to persuade them. So Paul left the synagogue, taking with him all those Jewish men and women who had come to trust in Christ as their Savior and Lord. He rented space in a public lecture hall owned by a guy named Tyrannus. For the next two years during some portion of every day Paul was in that lecture hall continuing to do what he had begun to do in the synagogue. Every day for at least 730 days he reasoned with all who were present, seeking to persuade all who would listen that Jesus was the Savior and King of the world.

Look at what happened as a result of this daily proclamation of the good news about Jesus. "This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks." As a result of Paul's faithfully expounding the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ as revealed in the OT Scriptures every day for

two years not only was the city of Ephesus reached with the gospel but all the people who lived in the Roman province of Asia, an area about the size of Wisconsin and the Upper Peninsula of Michigan combined heard the gospel. How did that happen? Paul did not leave Ephesus. He was in town every day for two years teaching and so he didn't personally go into the region of Asia and teach the gospel.

What happened was that as men and women were overcome with the knowledge of the grace of God in Christ, as they were born again by the Spirit of God, they did what all people do in regard to those things and persons whom they love. They talked about Jesus everywhere they went. As they visited their relatives who lived in other Asian cities and as they made business trips to other Asian cities they talked about this amazing Lord Jesus who had done everything for believing sinners to be saved from hell and for heaven. The people caught the virus of Christianity and spread the contagion wherever they went. But we also know that it wasn't only through the serendipitous travels of the members of the Ephesian church that the gospel spread throughout Asia but also the Ephesian church intentionally sent out men to plant churches in the region. We know the name of at least one of those men from one of Paul's letters. A guy by the name of Epaphras went to the city of Colossae which is located about 100 miles SE of Ephesus and preached the gospel and by his preaching God created another contagious congregation in that city.

Friends I want our church to be infected with Christ and to spread the contagion. I want our church to be part of God's work of rescuing his people out of this lost world. The way for us to be a contagious church is for me and the other elders and our small group leaders and our parents to do one thing, preach the gospel; set forth the wonder and glory of the great Son of God revealed on the pages of this book. It will happen as the members of this church, men, women and children devote themselves to the apostle's teaching as set forth in this book. Would it not be an awesome thing if we were able to say that every resident of Rock County heard the word of the Lord because we preached the gospel every day in our church, in our homes, in our small groups, in our personal conversations, in our counseling sessions? This is the primary way in which God creates converted and contagious congregations throughout the whole earth so that all the inhabitants of the earth hear the word of the Lord.

II. Magnifying the superiority of Jesus over everything (vv.11-17)

In addition to Paul's daily lectures God worked extraordinary miracles through Paul. As an example of what he was talking about, Luke tells us that handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched Paul were taken to sick and demon possessed people and when these pieces of material touched those who were afflicted, they were healed. There are a couple of things to note about this description of miracles. First, God is the one doing the miracles, not Paul. These pieces of clothe do not have healing power because they touched Paul but because God determined that he was going to show forth his power in these ways. He is the one who is in charge of miracles, not human beings. The miracles are not done because Paul says the right things or prays the right prayers or has the right kind of faith. Second, the point of the miracles is to validate the message which Paul was preaching about the kingdom of God. This Jesus whom Paul is preaching is the agent who is establishing God's kingdom because God's enemies are being vanquished in his name through Paul, the herald of Jesus. You can see this is the point of the miracles in v. 17 where the result is that God is feared and the name of Jesus is extolled due to these supernatural events.

Third, notice these are not ordinary miracles, which, if you think about it is a weird thing to say. A miracle, by definition is an extraordinary event. So God through Paul does miracles here in Ephesus that are not of the usual variety of miracles that he has been doing through the apostles. One thing this means is that no one should expect these kinds of miracles to happen on a regular basis. What happens in Ephesus is very unusual, even for Paul through whom God regularly did miracles. Why did God do such unusual miracles in Ephesus? The answer to that question can be seen in what Luke tells us happens next. What we discover in the story of the Jewish family that is engaged in the work of exorcism and the burning of several million dollars worth of magic books is that Ephesus is a place where magic is practiced. Occultic practices are rampant in Ephesus and so God is out to manifest his sovereign power over all other powers through these extraordinary miracles.

This is clearly the point of the weird story about Sceva's seven sons. They are an example of the kind of mixed up, magical practices that are rampant in Ephesus. People turn to magic because they are in distress. Here is a man who is possessed by an evil spirit. So he or his family does what afflicted people do all over the world. They seek the help of the Shaman, the witch-doctor, the faith-healer. The family pays the sons of Sceva to come and set their loved one free from the evil spirit. They believe that power over evil spirits can be exercised by certain people who have special, secret knowledge and who can use certain words or incantations to manipulate the spirits and stop them from doing harm. These sons of Sceva have been observing the miracles that Paul has been performing and know that Paul's authority is due to the name of Jesus. So they add the names of Jesus and Paul to their repertoire of incantations in order to take control of the evil spirit inhabiting this man. They do not have faith in Jesus, rather, like all who engage in the practice of magic, they have faith in their words.

The seven sons have an encounter on this day that they have never had before. The spirit speaks to them through the man, "I know who Jesus is and I recognize Paul, but who are you?" The demon then enables the man to leap upon these seven sons and strip them of their clothes and beat them so severely that they only barely escape with their lives, fleeing the house naked and wounded. Here we find some of the most well-known magicians in town overcome by one demon-possessed man while little pieces of clothe that have simply touched the apostle Paul are brought into the presence of those with evil spirits and the spirits flee without a word being uttered. It is no wonder that the result of these events is that great fear fell upon the inhabitants of Ephesus and the name of Jesus was exalted and treated with great respect.

So what are we to take away from this strange story? First, God is in charge of miracles, not us. He exercises his power according to his own purposes and we are not in charge of deciding when and where he ought to do miracles. Second, God's goal is always to magnify the name of Jesus as Lord of the universe and Savior of all who believe. Third, if you believe in Jesus you have no need to fear demons. I want you to notice that people feared the name of Jesus because a demon, an enemy of Jesus, bore witness to the glory of Christ. Satan and his hosts' primary weapon against humans is deception. Magic is one of his most potent deceptions. Yet, this demon acted contrary to Satan's purposes. He did the will of God by bearing witness to the power of Jesus and mocking the magical incantations of the sons of Sceva. God rules over demons, they are not free to do whatever they want. Satan truly is God's messenger boy and should not be feared by those who belong to Jesus. Fourth, do not practice magic, either its pagan or Christian form. There is no power in human words. You cannot make yourself sick or well by what you say. Astrology, numerology, incantations, spells, fortune telling, all these occultic practices are but a deception of the devil. There is no power in them because humans have no power over the spirit world. God alone exercises his power on behalf of his people for his purposes. Our safety and well-being lies in our humble dependence upon our Father to care for us according to his will, looking to the return of Christ as the only final solution to the sufferings of this world. Finally, I would repeat what Jesus told his disciples after they returned from a preaching tour and were all excited about the fact that demons were subject to them in his name. He said, "do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you. Rather, rejoice that your names are written in heaven." As the great preacher, Chrysostom said, "It is not demons who will keep you out of heaven. Sin is what keeps you from heaven and thus freeing a person from their sins is a far greater work than freeing them from a demon."

III. Enabling Christians to die to their sin (vv.18-20)

The most surprising statement in our entire passage is v. 18. The overthrow of the magic practicing sons of Sceva by the demon possessed man which created a wide spread admiration for the name of Jesus also had a profound effect upon a number of Christians. "...many of those who were now believers came, confessing and divulging their practices." Apparently a number of individuals who had been born again of the Holy Spirit, had placed their faith in Jesus and been baptized in water and were faithfully attending the assembly of the church, listening to Paul preach the gospel daily were still engaged in the practice of magic. When they saw the impotence of magic as evidenced by the overthrow of these Jewish exorcists they realized how wrong they were

to still be engaging in these magical practices. Thus they voluntarily and publicly came forward, most likely during one of those daily assemblies in the lecture hall of Tyrannus and told the congregation that they were still practicing magic. Then they voluntarily, not by the instruction of Paul or any other leader brought together all their magic books and had a bonfire.

We are not told this story so that we or any other church should host regular book burnings. What happened here was the result of God's manifesting the glory of Jesus over all other powers. It was the spontaneous and voluntary response of some of God's people to this revelation. The burning of the books was to show that they were completely renouncing their participation in these sinful ways of living. From now on they would depend only upon Christ, not upon their magical knowledge or ability. They renounced all superstitious allegiances and declared they would trust only in Christ and his protection and provision. Their life is in his hands and they have no other hope or Savior besides him.

There are three things that this response teaches us. First, when a person becomes a Christian she doesn't immediately forsake every sin. In part this is due to the fact that when you become a Christian you don't know all the things that God considers to be sin. There are practices and beliefs that we have that simply feel natural and normal and neutral and so we continue to practice them even after becoming a Christian. However, the second thing that this tells us is that Christians, when they realize that God calls a behavior or belief they hold to be sin, they immediately forsake that sin. This is the mark of true Christianity. Those who profess faith in Christ but who refuse to flee from those practices and beliefs that God calls sin when they learn of it, can have no confidence that they are Christians. Third, true Christians will pay any price to rid themselves of sin. The value of all the burned magic books was at least 4 million of today's dollars. It doesn't matter what the cost, the Christian will pay it to be free from sin. The man addicted to pornography happily turns off the internet so that he won't be able to sin any longer. The unmarried couple breaks up or refuses to ever be alone together in order to stop sinning sexually. The shoplifter repays the stores from which she stole merchandise. The liar tells the truth and asks those to whom he lied to forgive him no matter what it does to his reputation. The greedy person gives away his retirement fund to demonstrate he loves God, not money. The drunk pours out all the stashed alcohol in the house and never drinks again. The conflicted married couple finally goes to an elder to get help in their marriage. The impulse in the Christian's heart to please God and to live a life that glorifies him overcomes all fear of embarrassment or the loss of income or inconvenience in living and so we put our sins to death in voluntary acts of radical obedience and sometimes we do this in a very public way to show the glory of Christ.

IV. Leading called leaders to new opportunities (vv.21-22)

Once the region of Asia has been fully evangelized, Paul is led by the HS to return to the churches he established in Macedonia and Achaia to see how they are doing and then to go back to Jerusalem and from there he says, he must go to see Rome as well. Paul talks about these plans at great length in a number of his letters we have preserved for us in the NT. We know that in addition to helping the churches he planted he also will be collecting money from them to deliver to the poor in Jerusalem. In Romans 15 he explains more fully his motivations for wanting to go to Rome. He says to the Christians living in Rome, Romans 15:23-25, "But now that there is no more place for me to work in these regions, and since I have been longing for many years to see you, I plan to do so when I go to Spain. I hope to visit you while passing through and to have you assist me on my journey there, after I have enjoyed your company for a while. Now, however, I am on my way to Jerusalem in the service of the saints there."

This is God's plan for Paul that he go help the churches he has planted, that he take a collection of money to the poor in the church in Jerusalem, that he go preach the gospel to the church in Rome and have them assist him in going to Spain to preach the gospel on the western edge of the Roman Empire. This was not God's will for every other Christian living in Ephesus. This was not God's will for Timothy or Erastus. Paul sends them ahead to prepare for his coming to the churches in Macedonia and Achaia. Both these men end up being pastors in Ephesus and Corinth respectively. This is the way that God has always worked to create converted and

contagious congregations throughout the world. He has sent called and gifted men and women across cultural and racial and language boundaries to preach the gospel in new places so that new congregations of people who fear God and exalt Jesus and forsake their sins as a result of hearing the gospel persistently preached are formed throughout the world. We are involved in this work of God. By God's grace we are preaching the gospel and exalting Christ. We are supporting with our finances and prayers a number of men and women whom God has called to go do this work in other countries of the world. Right now 6 of our members are in Mongolia helping our sister church there to establish another congregation on the Mongolian border with Russia. During this next year we are going to begin the process of planting additional congregations of contagious Christians in Rock County. This work will take place until that day when all of God's people from all the nations of the world will have been gathered together and then the end will come and King Jesus will return to resurrect us and take us to live with him in the new heavens and the new earth forever.

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