

EPHESUS AND THE GOD WHO MEETS MAN
AT HIS POINT OF NEED
ACTS 19:8-20

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

I was channel surfing last week when I came across the movie *Forrest Gump*. (PROJECTOR ON--- FORREST GUMP) I have seen the whole thing a couple of times and parts of it quite a few times. One of the attractive features of the film is the simple but persistent faith in God from the main character. Forrest's faith is set in contrast to the cynicism of his commanding officer in Vietnam. (LIEUTENANT DAN) As most of you remember, Forrest saves Lieutenant Dan's life in a vicious battle, but the lieutenant loses both legs. With his return to the U.S. he becomes a cynic and a critic of Forrest's faith in God.

When Forrest talks about his desire to be a shrimp boat captain in the Gulf of Mexico, the lieutenant makes fun of that wish and says that if that day ever happens, he will become Forrest's first mate. After a series of events Forrest is able to buy a shrimp boat (SHRIMP BOAT), and the lieutenant, still bitter and angry at God, keeps his word. He shows up to be Forrest's first mate. Their effort to find and sell shrimp does horribly at first. This only feeds the lieutenant's cynicism.

But then one night a terrible hurricane strikes when Forest and the lieutenant are out at sea. (LIEUTENANT DAN 02) The lieutenant ties himself to the top of the shrimp boat and yells and curses at God. But they survive the storm, and when Forrest and Lieutenant Dan return to port, they discover that the entire shrimp fleet has been wiped out. They have the only functioning shrimp boat for miles around. They have an instant monopoly on the shrimping business. Soon they begin to haul in lots of shrimp and to make lots of money. (BUBBA GUMP SHRIMP) More importantly the lieutenant comes to peace with God.

The story does not explain what this reconciliation with God involves, and it is only fiction. But it illustrates in an effective way an important aspect of the character of God. (PROJECTOR OFF) Man is in rebellion against God. But a gracious God often reveals Himself to people at their point of need. In the midst of their cynicism, in the midst of their pain, in the midst of their brokenness, He makes His presence known. We saw that last week in the conflict in Iraq where Marine corporal Jeff Guthrie came to faith in Jesus. In my pod cast last week I also told about others of his buddies who also came to faith.

The passage before us this morning also illustrates this characteristic of God whereby He meets us at our point of need. As we examine it, I trust that we will find both encouragement and challenge for our own lives. In the midst of our weakness and

brokenness and sinfulness God reveals Himself as the One sufficient to meet our greatest need.

I.

First, in v. 8 of Acts 19 we are going to see that GOD MEETS THE JEWS AT THEIR POINT OF NEED. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. GOD MEETS THE JEWS...) We have been looking at the third missionary journey of the Apostle Paul. I pointed out last time as we looked at his arrival at Ephesus that Paul was to spend most of this third trip at the city of Ephesus. (EPHESUS MAP)

Ephesus was the most dominant and influential city in this entire part of Asia Minor. It was the capital of the Roman province of Asia. (EPHESUS RUINS) It was a center of shipping and fishing and manufacturing and religion and tourism. The Temple of Artemis was located here. (EPHESUS TEMPLE ARTEMIS) It was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, and people came from great distances to see this building and to worship Artemis. She was regarded as the goddess of the hunt and of childbirth.

Now man's greatest need is always salvation from sin. But the way in which that need manifests itself varies from individual to individual and from culture to culture. The Jews had a felt need for a Messiah. Indeed their Scriptures spoke of a coming Messiah. Even today the more conservative religious Jews believe that Messiah is still coming. Jesus, of course, was the fulfillment of those Scriptural promises. The job of the first apostles was to show these Jewish people that this Jesus was indeed the Messiah. The Hebrew Bible was the point of contact. It was the common ground that they all shared.

So when Paul began his work at Ephesus the Scriptures were the basis for his outreach to the Jews of Ephesus. The historian Luke writes in v. 8, **"And he entered the synagogue and for three months spoke boldly, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God."** The Old Testament spoke about the kingdom of God and about its king. Paul argued that Jesus was the king and that he would return to earth some day to make that kingdom a full reality.

Paul spent three months speaking in the Ephesian synagogue, probably on the sabbaths. This was something of a record in his ministry. Usually he was kicked out of the synagogues before long. But here he got a better hearing. Eventually, however, some of his listeners became hardened and resistant to his message, and he had to leave. But he brought a number of Jewish believers with him. God had met these people at their point of need. They had recognized from the Scriptures that this Jesus whom Paul described was their long promised Messiah. Their felt need was for a Messiah. God used the converted rabbi Paul to effectively demonstrate from their Bible that Jesus was the Messiah. And some responded.

Many religious people are like the first century Jews who went to synagogue in Ephesus. The Ephesian Jews sensed that they had a spiritual need. They were involved in religious activity. They were moral people, for the most part. But something was missing. They needed the Messiah who could connect them to the Lord God.

Today there are many religious people who go to church and lead moral lives and do good works. They are caught up in church life and religious traditions. But they, too, need a Messiah. They aren't really connected with God by a personal relationship with Christ. Oftentimes these people aren't really very familiar with the Bible. Like those first century Jews they need to read the Bible themselves and find out what it has to say about Jesus. For it is only the God of the Bible and the Savior of the Bible who can meet their, perhaps your, deepest needs.

II.

In vv. 9-17 then we find that GOD MEETS THE GENTILES AT THEIR POINT OF NEED. (PROJECTOR ON--- GOD MEETS THE GENTILES...) Verse 9 refers to the fact that the Christians were forced out of the synagogue. Notice that the believers at this time were referred to as "the Way," a reference to Jesus' absolute claim to the way, the truth and the life. Ephesus was a bigger city than some of the other towns were Paul had been mistreated at the instigation of the Jews. The members of the synagogue unhappy with Paul's message didn't have the influence and the numbers to try to expel Paul from this town.

The text says that Paul took the new followers and began meeting with them in the school of Tyrannus. Probably this was a lecture hall that the Christians rented. It was common in the larger communities of the Greek and Roman world for philosophers and teachers to have buildings that they would use to teach. If they didn't own a building, they might rent space somewhere. So this guy Tyrannus was either a landlord or a teacher who rented space to the Christians. Tyrannus is actually the Latin word for "tyrant." Perhaps this guy was a tough teacher who had acquired his name from his students.

One set of early copies of the New Testament in v. 9 adds the claim that Paul reasoned in this hall between 11 AM and 4 PM each day. While that may not have been in the actual manuscript that Luke wrote, it could reflect an early tradition that was true. For we know that Ephesus had a hot climate, and in this time and place long siestas in the middle of the day were typical. One pair of historians claims that more people would have been asleep at 1 PM than at 1 AM. It was typical for Ephesians in the first century to work in the morning, take a siesta in the middle of the day, and then continue working into the evening. Probably the school of Tyrannus wasn't in use during this siesta time, and they got the space at a cheap price.

In the next chapter Paul will make reference to the fact that he worked with his hands during his time at Ephesus. We have already seen that he worked as a tentmaker, or leatherworker, earlier in his ministry. It may well be that he worked at this employment in the morning, taught at the school in the middle of the day, and maybe went back to work for a while in the evening.

Verse 10 indicates that what went on in this school had a tremendous influence on the entire province of Asia. Paul may not have gone much outside of Ephesus during this

two year period. But other Christians influenced by his teaching did. We know from other clues in the New Testament that the church at Colossae was begun during this time. (ASIAN CHURCHES) Paul would later write a letter to the Christians there that would be included in the New Testament. The first few chapters of the Book of Revelation mention seven churches in Asia. Perhaps many of them were begun at this time. Also during this time Paul wrote 1 Corinthians. (OVERHEAD OFF)

Verses 11 & 12 describe something else that contributed to the impact of the gospel. Luke writes, **“And God was doing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, 12 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.”** Literally Luke calls these “miracles not of the ordinary kind.” By definition miracles are not ordinary. But these miracles were beyond what Paul and his companions had even seen.

One example of these extraordinary miracles involved handkerchiefs and aprons. The word for “handkerchief” was actually “sweat-cloth.” It referred to a cloth that would be worn around the head and used to wipe sweat off of the face and perhaps to keep sweat from running down the face. The apron involved was an apron that would be used by a workman. So these particular articles were probably used by Paul in his leather work. Taken to sick people and to people possessed by evil spirits, the Lord was causing amazing healings to take place.

Critics look at this little episode and don’t take it seriously. They treat it as being on the level of a fairy tale. We may look at it initially and scratch our heads. But there was more going on here beneath the surface that we need to understand. Ephesus was a center for all kinds of occultic and magical activity. It had a reputation throughout the ancient world for what might be referred to as the paranormal. People came from all over to visit spiritists and mediums and diviners and prophets and exorcists. Much of their activity was fakery and charlatanism. But some of what they were doing truly involved demonic powers.

The Lord in His grace had determined to transform this community that was in the clutches of the spiritual forces of evil. What He did was to meet the Gentiles at their point of need, at their point of interest. “OK, you guys think that there is power and truth and wisdom in your black arts. You are searching for help and wisdom and power in this stuff. Look at this.” And God did miracles of healing and exorcism and other extraordinary miracles not detailed, done in some way through the instrumentality of the Apostle Paul. What they witnessed far surpassed anything which they had seen in the realm of the occult. God met them at their point of need and interest.

When God brought the children of Israel out of Egypt, He used miracles to counter the supposed power of the Egyptian gods. The Egyptians had a whole host of gods which they believed had authority over the various aspects of nature. They had a god of frogs and a god of insects and a god of the Nile River and a god of the sun, who was called Re. So the Lord through Moses brought ten plagues in which frogs and insects

destroyed the land. Blood turned the Nile River red. A plague of darkness showed who really controlled the sun.

When Elijah had his showdown with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, he was confronting a Canaanite god who was regarded as having authority over rain and lightning and thunder. Three years earlier Elijah called upon his God to bring a drought upon the land. There had been no rain for three years. Now on Mount Carmel Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal to call upon their gods to bring forth fire from heaven to burn up their sacrifices. They couldn't do it. But when Elijah called upon God, He responded with lightning from heaven.

In Ephesus the occultists claimed to have a corner on the market in matters of divining and dealing with spirits and healing and casting spells. Now God through the Apostle Paul confronted them on their own territory and blew them away with extraordinary miracles.

It is interesting also to notice in #20 of Acts that Paul reminds the Ephesian elders that he wouldn't take anyone's money when he was in the city. He worked with his hands to support himself. This guy who was used of the Lord to do great miracles had to work hard to make a living. Ephesus was known to have lots of hucksters and charlatans. In order to get help from these specialists in the black arts, you had to pay. These characters were out to make money from the unsuspecting. Paul wanted to avoid any association with these money-seeking hucksters. Even though he was the instrument of more spectacular power than anyone in Ephesus ever saw, he would not take a red cent for his involvement with divine power, lest there be any doubt in anyone's mind about the purity of Paul's motives.

Today we find the hucksters on TV. They offer to send us prayer cloths, anointing oil, and holy water. The expectation is that we also send along some money. Richard Roberts, son of Oral Roberts declares, **"Sow a seed on your Master Card, your Visa or your American Express, and then when you do expect God to open the windows of heaven and pour you out a blessing."** (Russell McKinney, "The Disciples' Road," March 8, 2024) I suspect that the Apostle Paul would find such declarations repulsive.

So that we don't come to the conclusion that extraordinary miracles should be typical of our Christian experience, we need to keep in mind two things. **First**, v. 11 indicates that God was the initiator and performer of these miracles. It is not Paul's faith or creativity that is credited with the results. **Second**, there are only four periods identified in Biblical history where there are major outbreaks of the kinds of miracles that cause the world to sit back and take notice. One was at the time of Moses and the exodus of the Hebrews from Egypt. The second was at the time of Elijah and Elisha. The third was at the time of Jesus and the apostles. The fourth is yet future. The Bible indicates that there will be a major outpouring of miraculous activity at the time of the Second Coming. This is not to say that miracles don't happen today or at other times in the Bible. It is only to say

that the extraordinary, world-take-notice miracles are relatively rare in the Biblical time frame.

The miraculous activity associated with Paul had a tremendous impact on the entire Ephesian community, including the occultists. Thus in v. 13 we find that Jewish exorcists were trying to use this name Jesus in their business. Ancient spells and magic formulas have been found that come from this period in history. In fact the term “Ephesian writings” was often used in antiquity to describe these formulas and spells, showing us the leading role that Ephesus had in this occult activity.

Jewish people, in denial of their own religious faith, often had a prominent role in at least some aspects of these black arts. The Jews were known by others from the historical record to have a special connection with the power of God. So when some Jews strayed from the faith and got involved with this stuff, they were often more respected because of their heritage than were other occultists.

Verse 14 indicates that the sons of one of these Jewish exorcists were trying to use the name of Jesus in their work. Sceva was supposedly a Jewish chief priest, which may mean that he was a relative of a high priestly family in Jerusalem. These guys saw how powerful this name “Jesus” seemed to be for the Christians. They thought that there was power in the word itself, which they were soon to learn was not the case.

Perhaps Sceva and his sons even claimed to be followers of Jesus themselves. In Brazil and Haiti and parts of Africa people involved in the occult often combine elements of Christianity and other religions in their superstitious and magical activity. But the attempt of Sceva’s sons to tap into this Jesus power backfired miserably. Beginning in v. 15 we read, **“But the evil spirit answered them, ‘Jesus I know, and Paul I recognize, but who are you?’ 16 And 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. 17 And 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.”**

The effect of this incident was to cause the Jesus of these Christians to gain new respect from the entire population of Ephesus. We get the impression from the text that the story may have made more impact than the miracles themselves. No doubt the humor of the story also contributed to its effectiveness. The Ephesians learned that there was danger in using this name Jesus flippantly. There was power here that they didn’t quite understand. They feared it, and even the unbelievers gained respect for Jesus.

The Gentiles of Ephesus were caught up by superstition and magic and the occult and, in at least some cases, actual involvement with demonic forces. What the Ephesians needed was deliverance from these activities. What they needed to realize was that their supposed strength was really weakness. So God graciously met them on their own

turf. He countered their magical power with divine power and showed him that Jesus was the power to which they really needed to turn.

III.

(PROJECTOR ON--- III. GOD MEETS THE CHURCH...) Next I want you to notice that GOD MEETS THE CHURCH AT ITS POINT OF NEED. There are two things to notice here.

A.

First, there was THE NEED FOR APOSTOLIC AUTHORITY. (III. A. THE NEED FOR APOSTOLIC AUTHORITY) The early church could have been faced with a serious problem. As the church expanded to include Samaritans and Gentiles, and as the church expanded geographically to extend to more remote parts of the Roman Empire, there was a danger that the church could lose its unity. Any movement to remain effective must have a common set of beliefs. This Christianity deal was jumping across political borders and ethnic barriers. How was it going to maintain a core set of beliefs? They had the Hebrew Bible. But how was Christianity going to maintain unity of thought and practice about Jesus and His teachings?

The answer from God involved the apostles. The Lord used them to communicate doctrinal truth to His church. In order to maintain their respect and authority before Christians the Lord performed miracles through them. These miracles demonstrated compassion for people and had an evangelistic impact upon unbelievers. They also confirmed the authority and doctrinal teaching of the apostles. An individual like Paul who could be used of God to perform extraordinary miracles should be respected for his teaching as well as for his connection with divine power.

The handkerchief and apron miracles may strike us as strange. But it may be helpful to see a certain pattern of authority in the New Testament. In Mark #6 v. 56 reference is made to the fact that people were being healed by simply touching the hem of Jesus' robe. In Acts #5 vv. 14-16 we saw earlier that people were being healed when Peter's shadow struck them. Now in #19 we find people being healed by coming in contact with cloth sent from the Apostle Paul. The miracles in this chapter confirm the divine authority of Paul.

There are many incidents described in the second part of the Book of Acts in which Paul's ministry parallels Peter's ministry. This is one such example. In the early church, especially in Jerusalem, Peter was universally recognized as being the leading apostle of Christ. But Paul, at least initially, didn't have quite that same respect. One thing that Luke is doing in his descriptions of the ministry of Paul is showing that he had the same power and the same authority from God that Peter did. The Lord was thus meeting the important need in the early church for apostolic authority.

B.

The second issue which faced the church was THE NEED FOR PURITY. (III. A. B. THE NEED FOR PURITY) Verses 18-19 make this very clear. Luke writes, "**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.”

The verb tense in v. 18 suggests that the people who were coming forward with their magic books were already Christians. At least some of these Christians were still hanging on to remnants of their old way of life. But after the Sceva incident they were convicted that they ought to get rid of these reminders of their old lives. So they brought their magic books to the bonfire.

Verse 18 also says that they were disclosing their practices. The Greek word for “practices” was the same word that was used for magical incantations. According to magic theory the effectiveness of spells was bound up with their secrecy. In coming forward and disclosing their spells publicly the Ephesian Christians were renouncing their spells and, in a sense, rendering them ineffective.

Sometimes when people trust in Christ as their Savior today, they instantly lose their desire for the bottle, their craving for drugs, their addiction to other things. But sometimes those ungodly desires are not instantly removed, and, if we are honest, we would admit that we all still battle with habits and ways of being that are not the most godly.

What this passage teaches us is that it is important for the church to do its best to maintain its purity. When it does that, it has a powerful impact on the world. Thus Luke tells us in v. 20, **“So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily.”**

God is concerned about purity in the church today. In recent years there have been too many scandals involving churches and church leaders. Those of you who follow Christian news know about Mars Hill in Seattle and Willow Creek in Illinois and Hillsong in several locations around the country.

One of the biggest problems in the universal church of Christ today relates directly to the problem at Ephesus. Christians are involved in magic. Oh we don’t dabble in occultism or black magic or fortune telling, perhaps. But too many Christians have made the mistake of buying the lie that certain people who claim to follow Jesus have secret knowledge that gives them special power. They claim to have these formulas, which are little different than magic, that will get the recipient what he or she wants. Just name what you want and claim it into existence. Believe it, and perhaps use certain words, and God is bound to give you what you want. It is in truth an abomination. Instead of focusing on doing God’s will, it is using God to do our will.

IV.

So consider finally the principle that GOD MEETS US AT OUR POINT OF NEED. (IV. GOD MEETS US AT OUR POINT OF NEED) Our greatest need as human beings is to

be connected to God. We need forgiveness of our sins, which are an offense to a holy God. The message of Paul and the message of the New Testament is that this forgiveness comes from placing our trust in Jesus Christ as our Savior. He died to pay the penalty for our sins. In order to enter into the benefit of that sacrifice made for us we must accept that offer of forgiveness and eternal life. (EPHESIANS 2:8-9) Paul later wrote to the Ephesians saying, **“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, 9 not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”** So as an act of our will we must exercise our faith by believing in Jesus.

The passage before us today shows that Jesus Christ and His Word meet us at our point of need. For religious Jews needing a messiah the Lord used Paul and the Hebrew Bible to show the Jews of the synagogue that Jesus was the Messiah. For the Ephesian Gentiles who were looking for power and connection with spiritual forces beyond themselves the Lord graciously revealed Himself through remarkable miracles. For a young church composed of many believers who still were hanging on to some of the elements of the occult He used an incident with Jewish exorcists to show that Christians needed to get right with God.

Jesus Christ is still in the business of meeting us at our point of need. To those caught up in the New Age Movement, He offers true spiritual power. To those seeking spiritual truth in religion, He offers an explanation for the meaning and purpose of life. For those emerging from broken families, He offers deep fellowship and security in the family of God. To those disillusioned with meaningless materialism, He offers purpose in life that has eternal significance. To those caught up by intellectual pride, He brings along a Charlie Kirk and offers a philosophy of life that corresponds to reality. To criminals and revolutionaries and those who have done evil deeds, He offers forgiveness and a changed life.

Mitch Glaser was born in Brooklyn and grew up in Queens. His parents were Orthodox Jews who came from Russia. Mitch grew up with an anti-Christian prejudice. In college he started smoking pot and eventually got involved with harder drugs. After a semester in college he moved to California to explore the hippie scene. One night in a drug deal gone bad a guy placed a sawed-off shotgun at the back of Mitch's neck and a lot of pot and cash disappeared. Glaser swore off drug dealing as a result of that. God had met Mitch at his point of need.

Some months later he happened to run into an old friend who had become a Christian. She was Jewish. Mitch for the first time was exposed to the Gospel. God again met him at his point of need. He was not ready to buy into the Christianity thing yet.

One night as he was camped out south of San Francisco, he was thinking about this Christianity thing. He uttered a simple prayer asking God to show Himself if He was really there. He later went to the only phone booth in this campground. There in the moonlight he saw a beam of light shining on a New Testament which was in the place

usually occupied by a phone directory. He took it and read it and welcomed Jesus into his life.

One day some weeks later Mitch was walking on the shoreline in Sausalito and was praying that God would lead him to another Jewish Christian. Just then a wave washed a gospel tract up onto the shore. He found an address on the back of it. It took him to a place occupied by Chosen People Ministries. (MITCH GLASER) God again met him at his point of need. Today Mitch Glaser is president of Chosen People Ministries. (*Christianity Today*, September 2010)

Whatever your situation is in life, Jesus Christ has the resources to meet your need. (PROJECTOR OFF) The issue is whether you will trust Him with that need--- trust Him first by accepting Him as your Savior and trust Him after that with the challenges of life that come your way.