

Acts 19:11-22 - Littlebourne 20 August 2023 – Peter Hollander

¹¹ God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, ¹² so that even handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him were taken to those who were ill, and their illnesses were cured and the evil spirits left them. 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. They would say, 'In the name of the Jesus whom Paul preaches, I command you to come out.' ¹⁴ Seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, were doing this. ¹⁵ One day the evil spirit answered them, 'Jesus I know, and Paul I know about, but who are you?' ¹⁶ Then the man who had the evil spirit jumped on them and overpowered them all. He gave them such a beating that they ran out of the house naked and bleeding. ¹⁷ 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 honour. ¹⁸ Many of those who believed now came and openly confessed what they had done. ¹⁹ A number who had practised sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly. When they calculated the value of the scrolls, the total came to fifty thousand drachmas. ²⁰ In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power. ²¹ After all this had happened, Paul decided to go to Jerusalem, passing through Macedonia and Achaia. 'After I have been there,' he said, 'I must visit Rome also.' ²² He sent two of his helpers, Timothy and Erastus, to Macedonia, while he stayed in the province of Asia a little longer.

We saw last week that Paul was in Ephesus and stayed there two years preaching daily in the hall or school of Tyrannus. During this time he probably wrote his letters to the Corinthians, and may have visited them as well. Luke's narrative no longer suggests that he was present in Ephesus with Paul all this time.

These first few verses (11-12) speak about the miracles done through Paul. Luke writes that they were "extraordinary" which implies that before then, Paul didn't do a lot of miraculous healings and exorcisms. Having gone through Acts, we remember that Paul mainly taught, preached and debated. The only recorded miracles Paul did up to now were the blinding of Elymas the sorcerer in Paphos (Acts 13:6-12), the healing of the cripple in Lystra (Acts 14:8-10), and the casting out of the spirit of the fortune telling slave girl in Phillipi (Acts 16:16-18). Now healings are more common place and any cloths that Paul had touched were able to heal illnesses and remove evil spirits from those afflicted. We saw last week in verse 10 that all over Asia people had heard of Paul's preaching in Ephesus, which was effectively the capital city of the province of Asia: a large city of a quarter of a million people with a busy port and the large temple of Artemis (one of the ancient seven wonders of the world). The Gospel records the woman with the issue of blood being healed by touching Jesus's garment (Matt 9:20-22, Luke 8:43-44). The apostles healed many (Acts 5:12-16), and probably laid hands on the sick and the possessed as they were brought out into the streets.

Paul up until now just had these three instances of miracles – one blinding, one healing and one casting out of an troublesome spirit. Now there are many miracles and miracles draw crowds – as we have seen in the Gospels and the early church in Jerusalem. They would draw crowds today.

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. They would say, 'In the name of the Jesus whom Paul preaches, I command you to come out.'

The implication from this verse is that exorcism was a job that some Jews travelling around the Roman Empire were accustomed to be doing. In the Old Testament there isn't much written about exorcism. Josephus writes that Solomon had this gift, and that Jews used some incantations and symbols from Solomon's day, asking angels to cast out demons. Until recently pretty much all humanity believed that the possession by evil spirits is real. Modern agnostic psychiatry refuses to accept this reality, but when faced by it, even those doctors will accept, but not go public with the reality of demon possession. It is real enough for Jesus to heal people possessed, and if Jesus knew it was real, it is real. Modern science that dismisses demon possession is limited by its inability to measure anything of spiritual nature. Jesus asks the Pharisees in Matthew 12:22-28 "by whom do your disciples cast out demons?" implying that they had this ability.

Then they brought him a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute, and Jesus healed him, so that he could both talk and see. ²³ All the people were astonished and said, 'Could this be the Son of David?' ²⁴ But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, 'It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons.' ²⁵ Jesus knew their thoughts and said to them, 'Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand. ²⁶ If Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then can

his kingdom stand? ²⁷ And if I drive out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your people drive them out? So then, they will be your judges. ²⁸ But if it is by the Spirit of God that I drive out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.

So the Pharisees knew that they had to call on a stronger spirit to cast out a weaker spirit. The itinerant Jewish exorcists saw a business opportunity – casting out demons using the name of Jesus whom Paul preaches – had a better success rate than their own incantations. However all didn't go to plan.

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What do we learn from this? The demon possessed can be supernaturally strong, as we saw in Mark's Gospel by the man possessed by the demons called Legion, and in this case the possessed man beat up seven men with ease. The authority to deliver people from demons comes from Jesus who as we have seen in the Gospels has the power to cast them out. For us, only those filled with the Holy Spirit have been given the authority of Jesus to heal the sick and cast out demons. The mistake the seven sons of Sceva made was not realising that Paul wasn't doing the exorcisms, but that Jesus was doing the exorcisms through Paul. Incantations invoking the name of Jesus are not enough. When Jesus sent out the 72 to heal – by which was meant not just physical healing, but mental/spiritual healing which would involve casting out demons, he gave them authority to do this work (Luke 10:17) and they returned "rejoicing that the demons submitted to them in your name". Without taking the authority Jesus gives us, healing – both physical and spiritual – is unlikely to bring results.

Exorcism among Protestants is a bit of a taboo subject probably because – like miraculous healings – there are so few church leaders able to heal or cast out demons in a miraculous way in the mainstream denominations. The NHS, doctors and psychiatrists would be redundant if Christians could heal people using the authority of Jesus. We know there are a lot more healings than modern medicine would give credit for, and we believe prayer invoking the name of Jesus is able to heal. In Ephesus the people saw the reality of Paul's ability to heal using the name of Jesus.

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People are not aware of healings through Jesus and so have no awe or fear of the power of Jesus to change lives. Missionaries who converted whole nations – from the days of Paul, through to the whole of the Roman Empire, then after its fall, those parts of Europe taken over by pagan tribes, all of whom by the eleventh century became Christian kingdoms, to the missionaries in America, Africa, parts of Asia and Oceania; these missionaries preached to millions over the last two thousand years under the power of the Holy Spirit and now billions believe the Gospel message and know that following Christ is the way, the life and the truth. How many more would believe if there were signs and wonders to accompany the preaching of the Word? (Mark 16:20 and Romans 15:9). We cannot force Jesus to perform miracles and yet paradoxically we have the authority to ask – and believe we will receive what we ask – for miraculous healing of body and soul for those in need of healing. Some will say that those who want healing have to believe Jesus will heal them, because of Matthew 13:54-58 seemingly requiring faith before healing.

⁵⁴ Coming to his home town, he began teaching the people in their synagogue, and they were amazed. 'Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers?' they asked. ⁵⁵ 'Isn't this the carpenter's son? Isn't his mother's name Mary, and aren't his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas?' ⁵⁶ Aren't all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?' ⁵⁷ And they took offence at him. But Jesus said to them, 'A prophet is not without honour except in his own town and in his own home.' ⁵⁸ And he did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith.

But Jesus didn't just heal those who believed – the disciples noticed the man born blind and without asking what the man wanted, Jesus did something – he put some mud on the man's eyes and told him to wash in the pool of Siloam. Jesus was making a point and the blind man was used as an example of his ability to heal.

John 9:1-7 As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. ² His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" ³ "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so

that the works of God might be displayed in him. ⁴ As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. ⁵ While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” ⁶ After saying this, he spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man’s eyes. ⁷ “Go,” he told him, “wash in the Pool of Siloam” (this word means “Sent”). So the man went and washed, and came home seeing.

In John 5:1-8, Jesus approaches a lame man and tells him to get up. He isn’t asked if he believes Jesus can heal him and he probably doesn’t know who Jesus is either.

Some time later, Jesus went up to Jerusalem for one of the Jewish festivals. ² Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades. ³ Here a great number of disabled people used to lie—the blind, the lame, the paralyzed—and they waited for the moving of the waters. ⁴ From time to time an angel of the Lord would come down and stir up the waters. The first one into the pool after each such disturbance would be cured of whatever disease they had. ⁵ One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. ⁶ When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, “Do you want to get well?” ⁷ “Sir,” the invalid replied, “I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me.” ⁸ Then Jesus said to him, “Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.” ⁹ At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked.

However usually people sought out Jesus and later the disciples and Paul to be healed because they believed that they had the power to heal.

Moving on, the sorcerers, who were used by people in the same way witch doctors, psychics, astrologers and mediums are used today, could see that the name of Jesus had more power than their own spiritual guides, and that the mumbo jumbo contained in documents full of spells, incantations and guidance on sorcery no longer had any value when the true power of Jesus had been demonstrated as able to overcome every spirit. Many were set free and rid themselves of their past influences by burning their scrolls – all hand written and perhaps many many years old. What was once considered precious is now considered worthless by those saved by the grace of God: they had found something more precious – the love of Jesus, the infilling of the Holy Spirit and forgiveness of their sins.

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Fifty thousand pieces of silver is what the Greek says, and it all depends on how big these pieces of silver were to convert to today’s money. As one piece of silver was generally a day’s wages, multiplying by £100/day gives us £5 million! A lot of money which is why Luke recorded it. The public burning of these valuable items indicated to everyone the change in the lives of these sorcerers. Today, having stuff in your house that is what might broadly be defined as “devilish” is unwise and best burnt. New Christians often want to rid themselves of their sinful past by burning any books, magazines, pictures, letters, pagan objects, tarot cards, and other things to do with the occult, pornography, and other religions in order to start their life afresh with Jesus. Lead us not into temptation says the Lord’s prayer – so not having stuff that leads to temptation in your house is a wise course of action. Today we see little and large Buddha statues for sale everywhere and people have them without knowing what influence they have, because their eyes are blinded - which is what the devil wants. But those convicted by the Holy Spirit after hearing Paul preach knew what they had to do to cleanse themselves, because they already knew the danger that contact with the spirit world brought and that there was no joy in a life submitted to evil spirits.

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The narrative now changes to tell of Paul’s plan. It says here that going to Jerusalem was Paul’s decision, but later in chapter 20 he says he is compelled by the Holy Spirit to do this. Going via Macedonia and Achaia is a bit of a detour to get to Jerusalem, but he sent Timothy and Erastus to Macedonia remaining in Asia a while. In the end Paul probably never made it to Rome voluntarily, but in chains as a prisoner appealing to Caesar for justice.

Next week we see what the effect of Paul’s preaching of the Gospel had on the city of Ephesus.

So using the three points –

If this story happened today, what would it look like?

There have been devout Christians who have sent handkerchiefs to people asking for healing – not many, but a few, and people have been healed. There are ministries gifted with the power of the Holy Spirit of Jesus to deal with those under the power of demons. However there is very little publicity in the media about these things because good news isn't news!

What is this story saying to us today?

It is a warning not to dabble with the occult and to cleanse our houses from demonic influences. You may have had relatives who consulted mediums, who had a Ouija board, who were freemasons, who had books on magic and spells, who were interested in other religions and gave you things (little idols, or pretty pictures of shrines) they picked up on holiday thinking nothing of them. Yet these things in your home leave you open to spiritual oppression as the devil uses every chink in our armour to gain access to our thoughts, to erode our certainties, and cast doubts on our faith in Jesus.

Could the story make a difference to my life, and if so, how?

Far too many claim that because they are Christians, nothing oppressive from the devil can harm them, but they fail to put on the armour of God regularly and allow themselves to accept from others things that aren't clean for fear of offending the givers. Someone who comes to your home or church who has spent time in some New Age centre or been in temples where idols are worshipped, or who has been to South America or Africa having gone to a shamanist ceremony, or who is a freemason, brings with them the spirit or spirits of those religions. Often they like to give us souvenirs from these places. We all need protection against these spirits, and dismissing their power means they have won power over you. Peter writes "resist the devil and he will flee". Ignoring the devil is not the same as resisting him. Jesus wouldn't have spoken so much about evil spirits and the devil if they weren't real. We know the Holy Spirit is real because he touches our lives. Evil spirits can touch lives and wishing their existence away because the world doesn't want to know about them (it's unscientific, psychology doesn't talk about this) is foolish.