

Sermon Notes of Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley (28-11-1999 Guisborough Evangelical Church)

Acts 19  
Paul's ministry in Ephesus

Introduction

After 18 months in Corinth, Paul sailed for Syria (Acts 18:18). He landed in Caesarea, and then returned to Antioch in Syria (Acts 18:21,23). This ended the second missionary journey.

The third missionary journey started by Paul revisiting towns in Galatia and Phrygia which he had previously evangelised, this time to strengthen the Christians. When chapter 19 opens, Paul is in Ephesus. The year is 53AD. Paul spent three years here and did some of the greatest work of his missionary career here.

Ephesus was one of the three most ancient and famous cities of the East (the others being Syrian Antioch and Alexandria in Egypt). Ephesus is in ruins today, but can still be visited today, and the grandeur and glory of the ancient city can still be sensed. Paul coveted it for Christ. And he succeeded in planting the flag of the Gospel in this enemy stronghold – but not without a bitter struggle. With the blessing of God a glorious and lasting work was done there, and the Ephesian church was, for centuries, one of the centres of Christian power. Timothy became its leader (1 Timothy 1:3), and it was one of the seven churches of Asia to which John the Apostle wrote in Revelation (Revelation 2:1). The church was later associated with Polycarp and Irenaeus.

The strength of opposition to the Gospel

None of the places where the Gospel work was established and a church formed in the New Testament could be described as a “walk over”, any more than today. The missionaries faced tremendous odds and nowhere more than Ephesus. Ephesus was the main city of the Roman Province of Asia Minor, richer and larger than the Greek city of Corinth. It was known as “The market of Asia Minor” because all trade from inland towns found a way to it because it was an important port on the River Cayster.

It was also called “The treasure house of Asia”, and “Vanity Fair of Asia”. It was an assize town, the place where Roman governor tried important cases. Roman pomp and pageantry was a common sight. Important games were played there – the Pan Ionian Games. Ephesus had more than its fair share of criminals. The Temple of Diana (Latin) or Artemis (Greek) provided right of asylum for all cutthroats and swindlers of the ancient world.

Ephesus was the centre of pagan superstition. It was famous for charms and spells – i.e. “Ephesian letters” which people used for safety and success in love and business, and to bring children to the childless. People from all over the world who wanted these magic parchments were attracted to Ephesus. It was a most religious city. The Temple of Diana (Artemis) was one of the Seven Wonders of the World. The city contained vast and splendid buildings and 127 glittering marble pillars, each a gift of

a king. Ephesus's great boast was that she was the guardian of the most famous pagan temple in the Roman world. Here the power and pomp of Rome, the splendour of Greek culture and full tide of oriental superstition and magic came together. The sight and scene was to be marvelled at, admired, and boasted of.

But how did God see the city of Ephesus? And how did Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, view it? It was a desperately needy city, according to some of the descriptions in the letter to the Ephesians. **Without hope and without God in the world** (Ephesians 2:12). **You followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient... gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts...by nature objects of wrath** (Ephesians 2:2,3). **Darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts** (Ephesians 4:18). **Dead in transgressions** (Ephesians 2:5).

There are two ways we can see and view men. We can recognise man's achievements as God's creatures and appreciate work in various spheres – science, politics, culture, explorations and discoveries. We can also view the spiritual situation – man's relationship with God, and the powers and forces at work preventing men living lives and serving God as He requires. Paul always looked at things through Christian eyes.

Events justified his assessment when they reacted against the preaching of Christ. When they faithfully preached Christ, and people were won for the Lord, **the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power** (Acts 19:20). **But some of them became obstinate; they refused to believe and publicly maligned the Way** (Acts 19:9). There was a riot when those who made silver images of gods began to lose money as a result of the conversions. Their vested interests were affected, and **there arose a great disturbance about the Way** (Acts 19:23). There was uproar in the city, and Paul was urged not to speak to the crowd in the theatre – no doubt his life was in danger.

Men not only closed their ears to the Gospel because of greed and profit, but also tried to close the ears of other people to the Gospel as well. **I will stay on at Ephesus until Pentecost, because a great door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many who oppose me** (1 Corinthians 18:8,9). They were not content to go to hell themselves, but determined to drag others down with them.

So here was Ephesus – proud, rich, important, full of splendour, power and religion. The devil was much in control, and the power of evil was everywhere. The people were totally opposed to God, the Gospel, salvation in Christ, and many would stop at nothing to put down anything which threatened their position and profit.

#### Paul's reaction to the situation in Ephesus

There is nothing new under the sun. Human nature has not changed. Satanic opposition has not changed. Allowing for variations in local circumstances, the situation the church faces in every age does not change very much. What can we learn from Paul? How did he cope with indifference, opposition and problems?

Paul's message to the Ephesians was the same as he preached in Berea, Athens, Corinth, or wherever. The Gospel message was essential. We learn from his letter to the Ephesians that his preaching in the city emphasised what a dark and difficult people they were. **You who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ** (Ephesians 2:13). **Because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved** (Ephesians 2:4,5). He proclaimed to them the message of forgiveness and salvation through Christ's blood. He showed them how new spiritual life could be obtained through the Holy Spirit, how they could receive new birth and become alive to God and spiritual realities.

But rather than looking in close detail at the message, as we have done previously, we are going to be concerned with the qualities which Paul showed in dealing with the Ephesian situation.

- Spiritual discernment. Paul was able to see where men were at spiritually and lead them into a deeper experience. The twelve disciples of John the Baptist were in an intermediate state regarding their knowledge of the Holy Spirit. They were still “Old Testament believers”, and Paul, recognizing their state, was able to explain to them about the coming of Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, opening their understanding and enabling them to move forward. They believed on Christ. Then Paul baptised them with Christian baptism, and the Holy Spirit came on them. They spoke in tongues and prophesied. They went from a spiritual dawn to a spiritual noonday. This was clearly a special case, and cannot be used to prove there is a two-stage entry into Christian experience. Faith, baptism and the gift of the Holy Spirit belong together. But note Paul's spiritual discernment in realizing what was missing – the evidence of the Holy Spirit's presence. It is important to be able to see beyond the talk and the jargon, to discern where people really are, what the root of their problems is.
- Resourceful. **Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months... and had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. This went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord** (Acts 19:8-10). In some ancient manuscripts it says these daily visits were from the 5<sup>th</sup> hour to the 10<sup>th</sup> hour – five hours of theological debate, every day, for a whole two years. All roads converged in Ephesus, and all inhabitants of the province visited from time to time for various reasons. Many would have dropped in, been converted, and went back to their homes to spread the Gospel. In his ministry, Paul argued and persuaded, presenting the Gospel in a well-reasoned and serious way. He marshalled arguments, and persuaded and urged and pleaded. The Holy Spirit, as the Spirit of truth, opened minds and the Gospel was received by the hearers. And he used the lecture theatre of Ephesus, as opposed to the home he used in Corinth. Some people will never darken a church door, and we must learn from Paul not to limit ourselves in where we proclaim the message.
- Persevering. Paul was not relying on brief encounters, expecting quick results. He stayed altogether three whole years in Ephesus. He persevered constantly and would not give in. Perseverance is so important. The same

homes need to be visited and revisited. Family members need to be prayed for year in year out. Keep on keeping on – don't give up when our prayers aren't answered in five minutes. **Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up** (Galatians 6:9).

- Thorough and challenging. Paul kept nothing back, even when preaching to a difficult audience, even when his life was in danger. C.f. “Christ never hid his wounds to gain a friend” (Dr. Henry Drummond). There were things they needed to hear – the sin in their life needed to be exposed, their need for repentance and forgiveness, faith in Jesus Christ, and there needed to be a radical change in their lives. And he was obviously successful because he was so thorough – **Many of those who believed now came and openly confessed their evil deeds. A number who had practiced sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly. When they calculated the value of the scrolls, the total came to fifty thousand drachmas** (Acts 19:18,19). They really changed, there was no going back, and their lives were transformed. Paul's challenge to them to repent had produced lasting results. Theirs was not just an intellectual admission to being a sinner, but a deep conviction that changed their life-style. All faithful preaching needs to emphasise the change that needs to occur. The believer must realize that henceforth he is not his own, and that all his plans, ambitions, talents and personality are wholly the Lord's. He can no longer live as he pleases. Time needs to be given to the Word of God and to prayer. He can expect to be lonely and isolated because he is separated from the world to be wholly God's. He can expect persecution because his holy life will be a rebuke to the way others live their lives. Sugar coating the pill, promising peace and joy without the implications of commitment, is deceitful. People turn away and become harder than ever. Evangelism that is flippant and light-hearted yields a superficial short-lived impact.

### Conclusion

There were other things that marked Paul's ministry, for example, prayer. But here in Acts 19 we find some basic qualities that we all need in our ministry – spiritual discernment and the ability to help others, resourcefulness and perseverance, and a thorough and challenging presentation of the claims of Christ.