

Acts 19:8–20

Introduction

Last week we saw Paul arrive in Ephesus after passing through the upper (or interior) regions in Galatia and Phrygia [see map 1 on p. 8]. This is now Paul's third missionary journey. Luke recounts first the story of the disciples Paul found in Ephesus who mistakenly thought they had been baptized with the baptism of John. This is because of the connection with the previous account of Apollos who knew only the baptism of John. But now Luke steps back and summarizes the whole of Paul's ultimately three-year ministry in Ephesus, starting at the beginning.

I. Acts 19:8 — Now [*de*] after he entered the synagogue [once he had arrived in Ephesus], he continued speaking out boldly for three months, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God.

Remember that when Paul was homeward bound at the end of his second missionary journey, he stopped briefly at Ephesus. “When the Jews there asked him to stay for a longer time, he did not consent, but taking leave of them and saying, ‘I will return to you again if God wills,’ he set sail from Ephesus” (Acts 18:19-21). Now Paul has returned and he's spent the first three months speaking out boldly in the synagogue.

Luke says that Paul was “reasoning and persuading them *about the kingdom of God.*” We don't find this language of “the kingdom” or “the kingdom of God” very often in Acts, but this theme is central to Luke's message and to all of Paul's preaching. This is why I've titled this series in Acts, “The Kingdom Comes.” In the opening verses of Acts, Luke says that—

➤ Acts 1:3 (cf. 1:6) — [Jesus appeared to the apostles] over forty days... speaking about the things concerning **the kingdom of God**.

In chapter 8, Luke says:

➤ Acts 8:12 — [W]hen [the Samaritans] believed Philip proclaiming the good news about **the kingdom of God** and the name of Jesus Christ, they were being baptized...

In chapter 14, Luke tells us how in Lystra and Iconium and Antioch—

➤ Acts 14:22 — [Paul and Barnabas were] strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying, “Through many afflictions we must enter **the kingdom of God.**”

In chapter 20, Paul will address the elders of the church in Ephesus:

➤ Acts 20:25 — “And now, behold, I know that all of you, among whom I went about preaching **the kingdom**, will no longer see my face.”

Paul thinks of all his preaching among the Ephesians as a preaching of the kingdom. Finally, Luke concludes Acts as he began, emphasizing the kingdom of God.

- Acts 28:23, 30–31 — [Paul] was... solemnly bearing witness about **the kingdom of God** and trying to persuade [the Jews in Rome] concerning **Jesus**, from both the Law of Moses and from the Prophets... And he stayed two full years in his own rented quarters... preaching **the kingdom of God** and teaching concerning **the Lord Jesus Christ**...

These seven references to the kingdom in Acts have to be read in light of the forty-five references to the kingdom in Luke's Gospel. There we learn that Jesus came "preaching and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God" (Lk. 8:1; cf. 4:43; 9:2, 11, 60; 10:9), and in particular, that the kingdom of God was "at hand" (Lk. 10:11cf. Mat. 4:17; 10:7). Here in Acts, then, it's the kingdom that Jesus first preached as being "at hand"—the kingdom foretold by the prophets—that has now broken in upon the world.

What is the kingdom of God? We shouldn't think of the kingdom as a static reality. It's not a bureaucratic state. In the overall big picture, the kingdom of God is the **sovereignty** of God **exercised** in His **omnipotent rule** over all the world. The kingdom of God is a dynamic, and living, and powerful reality. We see this in the Psalms.

- Psalm 22:28 (cf. Ps. 145:11-13) — [T]he **kingdom** is Yahweh's and He **rules** over the nations.
- Psalm 103:19 — Yahweh has established His throne in the heavens, and His **kingdom rules** over all.

On the one hand, then, the kingdom (the power, rule, sovereignty) of God has existed since the beginning of creation and extends throughout the whole of creation. On the other hand, since the fall, the kingdom of God has been opposed by Satan and sinful, fallen man. This isn't dualism. The kingdom of Satan (Lk. 11:18; Eph. 6:12; Col. 1:13) has always been under the ultimate dominion of God (Job 1:6-12; 2:1-7). But the goal of the kingdom of God ever since the fall has been that the blessings of His rule and authority and power should be experienced by a redeemed people who will one day fill all the earth. It's this "consummated" kingdom that was shadowed forth in Israel especially during the days of King David and King Solomon. The psalmist writes of the Davidic king in Jerusalem:

- Psalm 45:6–7 — Your throne, O God, is forever and ever; a scepter of uprightness is the scepter of **Your kingdom**. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, Your God, has anointed You with the oil of joy above Your companions.

As each succeeding king proved wholly unfit to establish the consummated kingdom, the hope of God's people was focused more and more on that coming seed of the woman whose heel would be bruised by the serpent, but who would, Himself, bruise the serpent's head (Gen. 3:15). The prophets said that one day God's "anointed one" (the Messiah) would establish and exercise the power and rule and sovereignty of God in and among His own redeemed people. This is the kingdom that was proclaimed as being "at hand" in the Gospels and that has broken in upon the world in Acts. The Gospel isn't just a set of propositions. The Gospel is the proclamation of a

dynamically powerful and living reality. It's the announcement of the power of God exercised by the crucified, resurrected, and ascended Messiah, who now baptizes His redeemed people with the Holy Spirit. Remember what Jesus said to His disciples after His resurrection:

- Matthew 28:18–20 (cf. Mk. 9:1; 1 Cor. 4:20; Rev. 12:10) — “All authority [power/rule; *exousia*] has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to keep all that I commanded you; and behold, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

Paul says in Romans one:

- Romans 1:16 — For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the *power* [*dynamis*] of God for salvation to everyone who believes.

We see, then, how Paul can write in 1 Corinthians 4:

- 1 Corinthians 4:20 — [T]he kingdom of God does not consist in words but in *power* [*dynamis*].

It's in this biblical and theological context that we hear Luke telling us that Paul was “reasoning and persuading [the Jews] about *the kingdom of God*.”

II. Acts 19:9–10 — But when some were becoming hardened and were not believing, speaking evil of the Way before the multitude, he left them and took away the disciples, reasoning daily in the school of Tyrannus. This took place for two years, so that all who lived in Asia [cf. “the seven churches that are in Asia (Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, Laodicea)” (Rev. 1:4, 11); Colossae and Hierapolis (Col. 1:2; 4:13)] heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks [see map 2 on p. 8].

What is “the word of the Lord”? It's the good news of the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes. It's the good news of the power of God exercised now by the resurrected and ascended Messiah in and among His redeemed people by the agency of the Holy Spirit. But what were the outward visible signs that this power (kingdom) of God had broken in upon the world? Luke goes on to write:

III. Acts 19:11–12 — And God was doing not the ordinary [*ou tas tychousas*] miracles [powers/*dynamis*] by the hands of Paul, so that [*hoste*] cloths or aprons [perhaps worn by Paul in connection with his work as a tentmaker] were even carried [by people] from his body to the sick, and the diseases left them and the evil spirits went out.

Should we imagine that people were sneaking cloths and aprons from Paul and using them without his knowledge for healing diseases and casting out evil spirits? Or did Paul know what the people were doing and not say anything because he saw it was “working”? Was Paul accommodating himself to superstitious beliefs? Was God? Luke says right out of the gate that *God* was doing these “extra-ordinary miracles/powers” “*by the hands of Paul*” (*hoste*; cf. Acts

5:12; 14:3; see Lenski). The whole thing is cast in terms of God's purpose and initiative. Therefore, it was Paul himself who, according to God's will, was sending cloths and aprons that had been on his body to be the tools of healing and deliverance even in places where he himself was not present.

Luke says that these miracles (works of power) were not of the "ordinary" variety (Acts 14:3; 15:12; cf. Rom. 15:19; 2 Cor. 12:12). Ordinarily, a diseased or demon-possessed person would be addressed directly (Acts 3:1-7; 9:32-42; 14:8-10; 16:16-18) and hands might even be laid on him (Acts 28:8; cf. Mk. 6:5). This was to be sure that the power revealed in the healing or exorcism was connected with the whole preaching of the kingdom. The power revealed in the healing or exorcism was never to be separated from the rule and power of God exercised now by the resurrected and ascended Messiah in and among His redeemed people by the agency of the Holy Spirit. That was the whole point of these "works of power"—that they should be the outward visible signs of "the power of God" which was being revealed at that climactic eschatological moment in the Gospel (cf. Lk. 4:31-43; 9:1-2, 11; 10:8-9; 11:20). Luke records two other examples of "not the ordinary kind" of miracles. In Luke's gospel we read about a woman who had a hemorrhage for twelve years and how she was healed after coming up behind Jesus and touching the fringe of His garment (Lk. 8:43-48). Jesus said: "Someone did touch Me, for I knew that *power* [*dynamis*] had gone out of Me" (Lk. 8:45-46). We read in Luke chapter 6:

- Luke 6:17–19 (Mk. 6:56) — [A] great multitude of people... had come to hear [Jesus] and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were being cured. **And all the crowd was trying to touch Him, for *power* [*dynamis*] was coming from Him and healing them all.**

In Acts 5, we're told that "at the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were happening among the people."

- Acts 5:12–16 — [T]hey even carried the sick out into the streets and laid them on cots and mats, **so that when Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on any one of them.** Also the multitude from the cities in the vicinity of Jerusalem were coming together, bringing people who were sick or afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all being healed.

Here we have examples of healings and exorcisms where there wasn't any spoken word or laying on of hands. People were healed simply by touching the fringe of Jesus' garment or by coming under the passing shadow of Peter. But notice, still, the necessary connection with Peter through his shadow and the necessary connection with Jesus through His garment. And now, if anything, we have something even more "extra-ordinary." Paul sends cloths and aprons that he had worn (that were connected with his person) even to distant places so that the sick who touched them in true faith (cf. Lk. 8:48) would be healed of their diseases and delivered from evil spirits. There's no "relic worship" here. There's no belief that the articles themselves had healing value (cf. Lk. 8:48). Instead, this is a case of the power of God being uniquely present in His servant Paul to work these "extra-ordinary" miracles (cf. Lk. 5:17; Acts 14:3). These are visible signs of the power of God exercised now by the resurrected and ascended Messiah in and among all His redeemed people by the agency of the Holy Spirit. The message is, in sum, that the kingdom of God consists in power. Luke goes on to tell us in verses 13-17:

IV. Acts 19:13–17 (cf. Acts 8:9-24; 13:6-12) — But also some of the Jewish exorcists, who went from place to place, attempted to invoke over those who had the evil spirits the name of the Lord Jesus, saying, “I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul preaches.” Now seven sons of one named Sceva, a Jewish chief priest [a Jew from the priestly aristocracy], were doing this. And the evil spirit answered and said to them, “I recognize Jesus, and I know about Paul, but who are you?” And the man, in whom was the evil spirit, leaped on them, subdued all of them, and utterly prevailed against them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded. And this became known to all, both Jews and Greeks, who lived in Ephesus; and fear fell upon them all and the name of the Lord Jesus was being magnified.

The power of God is a power that cannot be channeled or controlled (contrary to what these seven sons of Sceva thought). The power of God is a sovereign power that can never be used or manipulated for our own self-serving ends (contrary to all forms of magic). But this makes it even more clear that the power of God truly is an omnipotent and irresistible and miracle-working power. This is no ordinary power. It’s the greatest—and ultimately the only—power there is in the universe. The power of God is, on the one hand, completely independent of you and me. But in Christ the Messiah and His baptism with the Holy Spirit, it’s a power that’s now always at work within us and for us. This must be so if we’re now citizens of “the kingdom of God.”

If we see a visible sign of this kingdom power in the “extra-ordinary” miracles that God was doing by the hands of Paul, we also see this in the evil spirit’s defeat and humiliation of the sons of Sceva. Luke says that “the man, in whom was the evil spirit, *leaped* on them, *subdued* all of them, and *utterly prevailed* against them, so that they *fled* out of that house *naked* and *wounded*.” But the power that so utterly defeats and humiliates these seven “exorcists” is the same power that’s being cast out even by the agency of cloths and aprons carried from the body of Paul, who preaches the name of Jesus—a fact that even the evil spirit confesses (Jm. 2:19)!

The result of this is that “fear fell upon them all [both Jews and Greeks in Ephesus] and the name of the Lord Jesus was being magnified.” Not the name of Paul; and certainly not any “relics” associated with Paul; but the name of the Lord Jesus was being magnified. There’s no selfish presumption here. Only reverent fear and trembling (cf. 2:43; 5:5, 11). There’s no superstition here. Only faith. There’s no magic or sorcery here. Only the power of God. And so we go on to read in verses 18-19:

V. Acts 19:18–19 — Also, many of those who had believed kept coming, confessing and disclosing their practices. And many of those who practiced magic brought their books together and were burning them in the sight of everyone; and they counted up the price of them and found it fifty thousand pieces of silver.

“Ephesus was [famous as] a center for magic. The... statue of Artemis... was noted for the mysterious terms engraved on the crown, girdle, and feet of the image. Referred to as the ‘Ephesian scripts,’ [these were] considered to have great power” ... “The scrolls that were burned may have contained [these scripts, as well as other magical] formulae, incantations, hymns and prayers” (Polhill and Peterson). Prior to their conversion, the Ephesian Christians had used magic arts. Even after their conversion, they hadn’t completely abandoned their former

practices. They were accustomed to fear the powers of darkness (as well they might) and so, as one commentator says, perhaps they kept various collections of spells as “an insurance policy” (Peterson). But now they’ve seen the worthlessness of all so-called magic against the power of Satan. And now they’ve seen, too, that true power which is the kingdom of God and against which no other power in the world has any potency whatsoever. If the Ephesian Christians are subjects of the kingdom of God, and if the power of God is therefore at work within them through the Holy Spirit sent from the risen Jesus, then what cause is there to fear the powers of darkness any longer? Indeed, it’s the fear of God which has fallen upon them all, and the magnifying of the name of the Lord Jesus, which has cast out all other fears. What need is there, then, for any spiritual “insurance policy”? “Greater is He who is in us than he who is in the world” (1 Jn. 4:4). Now the Ephesian Christians are able to ask with Paul:

- Romans 8:31, 38–39 — If God is for us, who is against us? ... For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The burning of their books of magic doesn’t mean that the Ephesians were presuming on an immediate release from all sufferings and trials in this life. They simply understand, now, that there’s nothing *in* or *behind* these sufferings and trials that they needed to fear. They understand, now, the power of God exercised by the risen and ascended Jesus and at work within them to guard them and preserve them and ultimately to present them blameless before the presence of His glory with great joy (Jude 24). They understand, now, the power of God which will ultimately give life to their mortal bodies, transforming them into conformity with the body of His glory (Rom. 8:11; Phil. 3:20-21). Because they understand this, they keep on bringing all their books of magic and burning them and rejoicing that the financial loss (“fifty thousand pieces of silver”) was no loss at all in light of their inheritance in the kingdom of God. Luke concludes in verse 20:

VI. Acts 19:20 (cf. 6:7; 12:24) — So the word of the Lord was growing *mightily* [*kratos*] and *prevailing* [*ischyō*].

Conclusion

The kingdom of God consists in power. It did in Paul’s day. And it does—not one iota less—today. The power of God exercised by the risen and ascended Jesus is always at work in each one of us by the agency of His Holy Spirit. The author of Hebrews speaks of those who have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and tasted the good word of God and the *powers* of the age to come (Heb. 6:4-5; cf. Mic. 3:8; Zech. 4:6; Lk. 1:35; 4:14; Acts 1:8; 10:38; Rom. 1:4; 15:13, 19; 1 Cor. 2:4; Eph. 3:16; 1 Thess. 1:5). Paul speaks in 2 Timothy of those who hold to a form of godliness, but have denied its *power* (2 Tim. 3:5). In another place he says:

- 2 Timothy 1:8 — God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but of *power* and love and self-discipline. Therefore do not be ashamed of either the witness about our Lord or me His prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel according to the *power* of God...

And in yet another place:

- Colossians 1:9–12 — [W]e have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be... strengthened with all *power*, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience...

It's true that we still experience many defeats and failures because of our sin, but there is a mighty power at work in us to guard us and keep us from falling and enable us to persevere in repentance and in holiness and in love and in service. It's this power at work in us now that will even give life to our mortal bodies on the last day. Therefore, since there's no obstacle that can finally stand before this mighty power at work in us, we're emboldened today to strive and labor all the more as those who are citizens of the kingdom of God. Indeed, as Paul says in Ephesians 3, He is the one who is "able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or understand, according to the power that works within us" (Eph. 3:20-21).

- 2 Peter 1:2–8 — Grace and peace [then] be multiplied to you in the full knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord; seeing that His divine *power* has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the full knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence. For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust. Now for this very reason also, applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence, and in your moral excellence, knowledge, and in your knowledge, self-control, and in your self-control, perseverance, and in your perseverance, godliness, and in your godliness, brotherly kindness, and in your brotherly kindness, love. For if these things are yours and are increasing, they render you neither useless nor unfruitful in the full knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

