

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Introduction - Acts and overview of the Gospel reaching Ephesus

Overview of series

Today we start a new series of talks, entitled "It's all about Him", in which we'll look at the things we're taught concerning our Lord Jesus Christ by the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Ephesians. Here's an outline of the whole series so that you can get a flavour of the prospective teaching, God willing:

- Introduction - Acts and overview of the Gospel reaching Ephesus;
- Ephesians 1:1-14 Chosen in Him;
- Ephesians 1:15-23 Learning of Him;
- Ephesians 2:1-10 Seated with Him;
- Ephesians 2:11-22 Brought near to Him;
- Ephesians 3:1-13 Made one through Him;
- Ephesians 3:14-21 Giving glory to Him;
- Ephesians 4:1-16 Growing up into Him;
- Ephesians 4:17-5:2 Walking after Him;
- Ephesians 5:3-6:10 Shining as from Him;
- Ephesians 6:11-24 Standing for Him;
- Revelation 2:1-7 Letter to Ephesus

This morning I'll introduce the series with a look at the 'History of the Gospel reaching Ephesus', followed by a review of Paul's church planting activities there. These events are recorded in Acts 18-20. But, first of all, I would like you to know that the whole of the *Truth for Today* team will be praying for all our listeners along the lines that Paul prayed for the Ephesians:

- First, for your continued spiritual enlightenment so that you'll have a greater appreciation of Christian blessings. It's the prayer of Ephesians 1:15-23;
- Secondly, for your ongoing spiritual strengthening so that you'll come to appreciate the Mystery about Christ and His Church in the eternal purposes of God. This prayer is found in Ephesians 3:14-21.

Now, let's start at Acts 18:19 to find out what happened when Paul first preached the Gospel at Ephesus. He was on his second missionary journey when he first came to Ephesus in Asia Minor, that part of the world we now call Turkey. In those days, Ephesus was the commercial metropolis of Asia. From it, roads radiated in every direction, giving it a surpassing position as a centre of trade. But it was also renowned as a religious centre and its temple to Diana or Artemis was reputed to be the grandest in the world. This temple was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world (Acts 19:35). The city's importance in history is largely on account of the conflict between the idolatrous Diana devotees, with their magical arts, and the enterprising Greek traders.

Paul couldn't stay very long but he left Aquila and Priscilla there (Acts 18:19-21). During his absence, Apollos arrived in the city and powerfully preached about Jesus, although he only knew the baptism of John (Acts 18:24-25). On hearing him, Aquila and Priscilla explained to him "the way of God more accurately" (Acts 18:26). However, Apollos left for Corinth soon afterwards (Acts 18:27), leaving behind some converts, who had been baptised with John the Baptist's 'baptism of repentance'. Paul encountered these disciples when he returned to Ephesus whilst on his third missionary journey (Acts 19:1-2). When Paul explained that they must believe on the Lord Jesus for salvation, they immediately responded and were baptised in

His name. With others, these twelve men formed the nucleus of the Christian church in Ephesus for the Holy Spirit came upon them (Acts 19:3-7).

This event kick-started Paul's Gospel campaign in the city and the region round about. As was his custom, Paul first took the Gospel message to the Jews. He spoke boldly in their synagogue, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God. But after three months, some became hardened to the Gospel and opposed Paul by speaking evil of the Way before their fellow Jews. So he withdrew from the synagogue forum. Taking those Jews who had been converted with him, he went into the hall of Tyrannus, which became the new location for his continued presentation of the Gospel on a daily basis for two years (Acts 19:8-9).

Acts 19:10-12 are so interesting that I'll quote them in full: "This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks. And God was doing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, 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" (English Standard Version). I ask: how can miracles be extraordinary? But that's what Luke, by the Holy Spirit, calls them because they verified the truth of the Gospel in a region of gross idolatry. They were indeed mighty works of God, which can only be adequately described using other words of Scripture: "they ... turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God" (1 Thessalonians 1:9). The living and true God is: "God our Saviour, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:3-4). It was He who was at work in blessing these people of Asia.

An aside

I divert from recounting the 'Gospel reaching Ephesus' history to make the point that the whole of Asia was reached during this Gospel campaign, with Ephesus at its centre. Many Bible expositors say that Paul's letter to the Ephesians is a general epistle addressed to churches in both the city and the surrounding region. That makes sense to me when we look how the apostle John addresses the seven churches of Asia in Revelation 2:1-3:22. Ephesus is first and foremost, but all are judged by the Lord "in the midst of the seven lampstands" (Revelation 2:1) - they gave a united testimony to Him.

Back to our main story

Returning to the account of the Gospel reaching Ephesus in Acts 19, we're told that a consequence of the extraordinary Pauline miracles was their attempted imitation by the sons of Sceva, a Jewish high priest. When these itinerant Jewish exorcists tried to invoke the name of Jesus over a demon-possessed man, he pounced on them, overpowered them, and said: "Jesus I know, and Paul I recognise, but who are you?" (Acts 19:15). News of this happening spread throughout the city, with the result that: "fear fell upon them all, and the name of the Lord Jesus was extolled" (Acts 19:17).

The bonfire

The fear of the Lord also came upon the Christian converts. Not only did they openly repent of all their evil ways, but, at great personal cost, they got rid of all their books of magic by burning them in public on a bonfire. The outcome is poignantly stated in Acts 19:20: "So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily". By comparing this verse with Acts 6:7 and Acts 12:24, where similar words are used about the word of God, we can conclude that Luke identifies all three happenings as significant milestones in the ever-increasing spread of the Gospel throughout the world.

The ensuing riot and persecution

Such was the practical effect of the Gospel in the lives of these believers that it began to adversely impact the local economy. A man called Demetrius, who was a silversmith trading in silver shrines of Diana, called a kind-of "trades' union meeting" to discuss the deteriorating financial situation. Placing his complaint before the gathering, he emotionally aroused their anger by provocatively suggesting that the goddess was being deposed of her worldwide magnificence. The whole city was thrown into uproar and two of Paul's companions, Gaius and Aristarchus, were hauled into the meeting place. There was total confusion for

about two hours as everyone chanted "Great is Diana of the Ephesians" (Acts 19:28). Some cried out one thing, some another, and most of them didn't know why they had come together! It took the guile of the town clerk to restore law and order but the persecution brought to an abrupt end Paul's three-year Gospel campaign (Acts 19:35-41). Acts 20 opens with him gathering the disciples together to say farewell to them so that he could depart for Macedonia. (Acts 20:1)

What about the Gospel in today's world?

I must admit that I'm thrilled every time I read these accounts of Gospel missions in Acts. But I'm equally thrilled and give God thanks when I learn of success in the Gospel today. For example, reports reach us from other parts of the world where people are similarly saved from idolatry. Sadly, conversions don't happen on the same scale here in the UK. Is that because so-called 'Christian' Britain has now itself become idolatrous? If it is, then we need to remind ourselves that we have the same Gospel to preach that Paul preached; and that it's mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds (2 Corinthians 10:4). We may not have idols' temples like Diana's at Ephesus, but we certainly have their equivalents, whether they're to do with the arts, culture, sports or the like! For example, St. James' Park in Newcastle where I live is widely acclaimed to be "the temple where Geordies go to worship"! But the Gospel testimony in Asia wasn't only in the words preached by Paul, it also emanated from the changed lives of those who believed. So I raise the question with us British believers: are there things residual in our lives from our unconverted days which are incompatible with the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ? What do we need to put on the bonfire?

Paul leaves Ephesus

Acts 19:21 tells us that Paul had already planned to leave Ephesus but then the troubles erupted and delayed his departure. He had: "resolved in the Spirit to pass through Macedonia and go to Jerusalem, saying, 'After I have been there, I must also see Rome'". Acts 20:1-16 outline his journey to Greece and back to Miletus, a port near to Ephesus. Deciding not to spend time in Asia, he sailed past Ephesus. He was anxious not to be delayed in order to be at Jerusalem by the day of Pentecost. He was also conscious that his original timetable had been over-ruled by God for the sake of the Gospel. I wonder if we give the same priority to the Gospel in our busy lives? Are we willing for God to overturn our plans?

Paul's church planting work at Ephesus - Acts 20:17-38

The Lord had disclosed to Paul that he would never get back to Ephesus again. So he asked the church elders to meet him at Miletus to prepare the church for life-after-Paul. It was a meeting charged with emotion as Paul poured out what was in his mind by the Spirit of God. First of all, he recounted with them how he had established the church in Ephesus. So we gain a wonderful insight into what constitutes "the work of the Lord" as he calls it in 1 Corinthians 16:8-10. Both the Gospel and doctrinal truths outlined here in Acts 20 are elaborated in his subsequent letter to them.

Gospel work

The church at Ephesus was founded by the evangelistic work done by Priscilla and Aquila, Apollos and Paul. Paul was the prominent evangelist. In Acts 20:24, he mentions 'the Gospel of the grace of God'. He explains its meaning in Ephesians 2:7-9: "[God shows] the immeasurable riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast". But Acts 20:21 gives the contents of the Gospel he preached, that he testified "both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ". I've heard several complaints in recent years of the lack of the preaching of repentance in modern-day Gospel sermons. But it ever remains a demand of the Gospel. For the Ephesian believers it necessitated them turning from their idolatrous beliefs and worship of Diana, with all of its accompanying vile and immoral practices. For us, it's turning from all other worldviews and our sinful ways. But we turn from these **to** God, the living and true God, our Creator. And we place faith in the Saviour, our Lord Jesus Christ who died for our sins upon the Cross and who rose again from the dead for our justification. About this belief Paul wrote: "you heard the word of truth, the Gospel of your salvation, and believed in him" (Ephesians 1:13).

Discipleship

I notice that believers are generally called disciples in the Acts narrative. This is deliberate because, after believing, the Ephesians were said to belong to 'the Way' (Acts 19:23). That is, they followed the Christian way of life. Paul explained to the Ephesian elders how he had made disciples of them when he says in 20:25 (King James Version) that he went among them "proclaiming the kingdom of God". The kingdom of God is about the rule of God in our lives. In practical terms it means that we must be baptised into the name of the Lord Jesus and allow Him to be Lord of our lives. The kingdom of God is clearly taught in Ephesians 4-6, the practical section of the epistle. For example: "Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is" (Ephesians 5:15-17); and the recurrent expression "as to, or in, the Lord" (Ephesians 5:8, 10, 19-20, 22; 6:1, 7 and 10). Paul made disciples of these Ephesian believers in four ways:

1. First and foremost he taught them the Christian way of life. "I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house" (Acts 20:20, English Standard Version).
2. Secondly, he taught by example: "You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia" (Acts 20:18).
3. Thirdly, he demonstrated this by his own lifestyle: "I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak" (Acts 20:33-35).
4. Fourthly, he reminded them of "the words of the Lord Jesus, how He Himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive'" (Acts 20:35).

Doctrine

Paul didn't just explain the requirements of a consistent Christian walk; he spent a lot of time with the Ephesians detailing the doctrines of the Christian faith. "I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all of you, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:26-27). The complete counsel of God is the theme of Ephesians 1:1-3:21, which outline the highest and richest blessings for believers. God has made known to us the secret of His will (Ephesians 1:9) that He is going to make Christ head of all things to the Church by putting everything under His feet (Ephesians 1:23). The destiny of the Church is to be Christ's bride (Ephesians 5:25-32) in accordance with God's eternal purpose which He has realised in Christ Jesus our Lord (Ephesians 3:11). "In Him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of [God] who works all things according to the counsel of His will" (Ephesians 1:11).

Admonition

Paul was upfront about the difficulties that this new church would have to face. He had appointed elders for this very reason. They were to shepherd the flock. He was particularly concerned that these elders understood their important role in the continuing health of the church. "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which He obtained with His own blood" (Acts 20:28). He was particularly concerned that they appreciated the value of the Church to God and Christ. Most importantly, he reminded them of the constant admonition he had given: "I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish everyone with tears" (Acts 20:29-31). So concerned was Paul about this matter that he arranged for Timothy to remain in Ephesus after his departure to counter any false doctrines that others would teach (1 Timothy 1:3-7).

With hindsight, we can look back over two millennia of church history to see what Paul meant by other doctrines. "Be alert" is a message he repeats in Ephesians: "Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might. Put on the whole armour of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes

of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 6:10-12). Sadly, there is a tendency to fall asleep rather than to stay awake. Paul exhorts: "Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you" (Ephesians 5:14). The admonition to this same church is renewed by the Lord in Revelation 2:4-5: "But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent".

Paul's departing blessing

Paul finishes his talk to the Ephesian elders with stirring words: "And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified" (Acts 20:32). God was able to keep them from falling by His all-sufficient grace. His word would edify them and give them assurance of eternal life. The same God and His word can do the same for us in the 21st century!

Luke records how this special meeting finished: "And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. And there was much weeping on the part of all; they embraced Paul and kissed him, being sorrowful most of all because of the word he had spoken, that they would not see his face again. And they accompanied him to the ship" (Acts 20:36-38). At the ship there was no ordinary farewell. Acts 21:1 states Paul's entire group had to peel themselves off, and tear themselves away from, the elders!

Closing Challenge

I'm sure that the prominent place that this church has in the New Testament is of great significance:

1. First of all, it's the focus of Luke's account of Paul's third missionary journey. Little is said of his activities elsewhere other than how they fit into his travels to and from Ephesus.
2. Secondly, there's much emphasis in Acts of Paul's Gospel preaching in and around the city.
3. Thirdly, as we have just seen, Paul spent three years completely dedicated to establishing the church (compare that to the period covering only three weekends which he had with the Thessalonians!), see Act 17:2-3.

Its importance is also presented in Revelation 2:1-3:22, where prophetically the Ephesian church (Revelation 2:1-7) represents that original state of first love, which characterised the earliest Christians for whom Christ was everything.

What about you and me today? What importance do we give to the propagation of the Gospel; to Christian discipleship; and to the edification of our local church?

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