PAUL'S MINISTRY IN EPHESUS

Key Verse: 19:20

“In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power.”

In the previous passage, we studied how Paul carried out evangelical work in Macedonia and Achaia, doing his best to proclaim to all men that Jesus is the Christ. Human beings look for a Savior who offers a military or economic salvation. Some even look to Michael Jordan for salvation of the nation’s economy. Isn’t that foolish? The story of man’s history is the story of man’s search for such a Savior, and it is a tragic story that continues to this very day. But in every synagogue and at every opportunity, Paul proclaimed the Savior Jesus Christ. He was not a military or economic Savior. Jesus lived as a good shepherd who healed the sick and preached the good news of the kingdom of God to the poor. But it was God’s will that our Savior Jesus should suffer at the hands of evil men, be crucified and buried. He did not die for his own sins, but to make a ransom payment for the sins of others. And God raised him from the dead, proving that he was in fact the Son of God who had shed his precious blood for our sins. The Son of God shed his precious and holy blood for you and me! We want a Savior who will make our lives peaceful and prosperous. But we need the Savior who defeats the power of sin in us and shows us the way to life. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 1:23-4, “...but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.” In today’s passage, we study the ministry of St. Paul in Ephesus, the major city of the province of Asia. While Paul’s second missionary journey emphasized the message of the gospel, his third journey in Ephesus emphasizes the work of the Holy Spirit and the message of the kingdom of God. When Paul emphasized the work of the Holy Spirit, many fearful and wicked people repented of their sinful lives. They also acknowledged the power and authority of Jesus and his word. We want to learn through this passage the power of the Holy
Spirit to rescue all men from evil spirits. May God help us to proclaim the message of God's kingdom with authority and power.

I. Paul strengthened all the disciples (18:23-28)

Look at verse 23. "After spending some time in Antioch, Paul set out from there and traveled from place to place throughout the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples." Paul was not just an evangelist. After proclaiming the message of God's grace to the people, he followed up on the churches that had been established throughout Galatia and Phrygia. Clearly, Paul emphasized that evangelism is not just winning souls, but building them up in the faith. Surely, among the disciples Paul also called several who could participate with him in his world evangelistic work. Paul had the mind and heart of Jesus, who saw that the problems of the world are all the result of a lack of good shepherds.

While Paul made his way back into the province of Asia, his coworkers Priscilla and Aquila continued to serve God in Ephesus. One day, they heard a brilliant and eloquent scholar of Alexandria named Apollos who came and spoke with great fervor about Jesus in the synagogue. His preaching was accurate, but his message was incomplete because he only knew of the baptism of John the Baptist, not about the Holy Spirit. He taught the baptism of repentance but not the grace of Jesus Christ or the help of the Holy Spirit. So his message was challenging and powerful, but not lifegiving. When Priscilla and Aquila heard his preaching, they did not judge Apollos for his mistakes. They saw his heart to serve God and invited Apollos to their home and explained the way of God more adequately (24-26). As a result, when he went to Corinth, Apollos was able to prove from the Scriptures that Jesus is the Christ and encourage the brothers there (27,28). How precious was Priscilla and Aquila's house church in God's work of establishing shepherds and Bible teachers for the flock of God. May God raise up many young men and women who are ready to establish families of God and house churches for the sake of raising disciples of Jesus in the 21st century.
We also learn from Priscilla and Aquila that Christianity is not an intellectual faith that God exists or that my sins have been forgiven. After repentance, there must be the work of the Holy Spirit. That is, there must be a personal transformation in the heart and mind of each believer. Otherwise, they only have head knowledge about God’s word with which to judge others, without any authority from God to rebuke sin in themselves or in others. We must be clear that true repentance opens the door for the Holy Spirit to come in and change our minds and hearts. Only those who have been transformed by the work of the Holy Spirit can know God. Only they can bear fruit to God while on earth and enjoy God forever in his heavenly kingdom.

II. God’s work at Ephesus (19:1-41)

First, teaching about the Holy Spirit (1-7). While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul came overland to Ephesus, a metropolis in the western part of the province of Asia, now known as Asia Minor. Ephesus was a strategic city, and the temple of Artemis there was once one of the seven wonders of the world. Artemis was the goddess of fertility for the Greeks. Ephesus was the seat of Artemis worship, which drew great throngs of people to its immoral festivities. When Paul arrived in Ephesus, he found some disciples and asked them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” They answered, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.” So Paul asked, “Then what baptism did you receive?” “John’s baptism,” they replied. Perhaps these men became disciples through the preaching of Apollos. Paul explained that John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance, but baptism into Jesus’ name is the baptism of the Holy Spirit (Lk 3:16). What happened when Paul explained about Jesus who gives the baptism of the Holy Spirit? Verse 5 says, "On hearing this, they were baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus." There was a great work of the Holy Spirit. They were very eager to be baptized into Jesus’ name. Then the Holy Spirit came on them. According to John's Gospel, the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus; the Holy Spirit rebukes the world because of sin. He also teaches the truth of God and comforts his people and empowers them when they are fearful. They also spoke in tongues. This speaking in tongues is different from the kind done by modern people, who want to escape from present realities. This tongue-speaking meant that they spoke the
secret things of God, forgetting all their profane language. They also prophesied. In the past they were slaves of petty desires, and could not see beyond their noses. Now they could see the future and say something about it.

In this event we learn the meaning of true repentance. We should not think that true repentance is simply refraining from a sinful activity. The word repent means to turn. Of course, we must turn from our sins. The young girl who only thinks about boys and boyfriends must turn from her sinful desires. The young man who only thinks about sports and games must turn from his wasting all his time on these things. But spiritually speaking, repentance is meaningful only when it brings about a change of allegiance. We can control our sinful habits a little bit. But unless we commit to Jesus and Jesus’ name, and welcome the Holy Spirit into our hearts, we will remain under the power and influence of evil spirits. Those who live under the influence of evil spirits are like alcoholics. They are always suffering from a sense of shame and guilt. Repentance is really acknowledging our spiritual need. Repentance is opening the spiritual door of our hearts, so that the evil spirits may be driven out, and the Holy Spirit may come in. Jesus Christ is the only one with the authority to send the Holy Spirit from heaven. We must repent in Jesus’ name in order to receive the Holy Spirit and be cleansed from our sins. Then we will be set free from sin, and can live as the holy children of God.

Second, teaching about the kingdom of God (8-22). Paul entered the synagogue in Ephesus and spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God. The theme of his three-month lecture was the kingdom of God. The point of our Bible teaching should be the kingdom of God, not worldly or material benefits. Some people argue that to believe in the kingdom of God is to look for pie in the sky while others enjoy it here on earth. This is foolish. Faith in the kingdom is very real; not abstract at all. Nor does it mean that our lives on earth somehow become meaningless or expendable. On the contrary, when we accept the promise of God’s kingdom from our hearts, our lives on earth become all the more precious, as they are devoted to the accomplishment of the purpose for which God made them. The message of the kingdom of God gives our lives on earth absolute
meaning and purpose, and gives us absolute guidance on how we should live while here on earth: growing in the image of Jesus, serving God's world salvation purpose. Our lives on earth cannot simply be a matter of sweating and grunting in order to eat three meals a day, only to die in agony. Through faith in Jesus' promise of his kingdom, we come to know that we are holy pilgrims, making our way forward to enter the kingdom of God. While we live on earth on earth, we must practice his love, and do good to others. One day, we will find ourselves before a heavenly throne, clothed in the image of holy Jesus.

But some Ephesian Jews refused to believe and publicly maligned the Way. Paul left the synagogue with his disciples and rented the lecture hall of Tyrannus. There he witnessed to Jesus and planted the hope of the kingdom of God for two years to anyone who would listen. The result was remarkable. All the Jews and Greeks who lived in the whole province of Asia heard the word of the Lord (10). God also did extraordinary miracles through Paul. Even handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him were taken to the sick, and their illnesses were cured and the evil spirits left them (12). Here we see that the Holy Spirit can work powerfully when the message of God's kingdom is being preached. The devil had been stamping around furiously in the province of Asia, causing many to fall ill or lose their sanity. But the message of the kingdom of God was like a powerful wind that blew all over Asia, driving out evil spirits from their strongholds wherever it went.

In the midst of a great work of God, a funny event happened through seven comedians who were the seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest. They went around and tried to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who were demon-possessed. They would say, "In the name of Jesus whom Paul preaches, I command you to come out." In this way, they made their living off of those who were suffering terribly under the power of evil spirits. What happened? "One day the evil spirit answered them, 'Jesus I know, and I know about Paul, but who are you?' 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" (15,16). Because of this event, people were seized with fear, and the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honor. Many who had believed in Jesus secretly came out and openly
confessed their evil deeds. When they had confidence in the authority of Jesus’ name, they were not afraid of evil spirits anymore. In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power (20). Paul’s work was fruitful when he preached the good news of the kingdom of God. Here we learn that even seven human beings are not more powerful than an evil spirit. The spiritual battle against evil spirits is not won through rituals or ceremonies. The spiritual battle against evil spirits is won when the kingdom of God is preached, people are led to repentance in Jesus’ name, and the Holy Spirit is welcomed into our hearts.

Third, reaction to the work of God (23-41). A riot arose in reaction to Paul’s preaching (23). A silversmith named Demetrius, who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought in a profitable business for the craftsmen. He stirred up his coworkers and slaves, saying that the honor of the goddess Artemis of the Ephesians had been damaged because of Paul. But in actuality, he was more worried about his income source. Demetrius stirred up his fellow workers and the whole city. “When they heard this, they were furious and began shouting: ‘Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!’” (28) How was the mob stopped? The city clerk worried about the possibility of a riot. Rome was tolerant, but Rome did not like any social disorder that would cause trouble to its government. If a riot ever occurred, the city’s mayor was held responsible for it. So the city clerk did his best to put down the riot; he succeeded. God used the city clerk to protect his servants.

In this passage we learn that Paul’s evangelistic work was the frontline work in the spiritual battle for the sake of God’s world salvation purpose. Through Paul’s preaching the message of the kingdom of God and the coming of the Holy Spirit, many people were rescued from the power of evil spirits. They were freed from their fears and anxieties, and they could live from then on as the holy children of God. These days, it seems that there are too many evil spirits in our world. We must know that there is no middle ground. Those who want to escape from the power and influence of evil spirits must receive the Holy Spirit through repentance in Jesus’ name. We must live as God’s holy children and pilgrims on the way to God’s heavenly kingdom.