

TUTORIAL

2.24

# God is with Paul as he ministers in Ephesus, Macedonia & Corinth

In this part of the Narrative, God gives Paul the ability to perform miracles to validate his ministry. The Ephesian believers recognise the contradictions between their lifestyle and what they say they believe. Paul's ministry directly causes a riot in Ephesus. He leaves Ephesus, goes to Troas, then visits churches in Macedonia and finally travels to Corinth. A plot to kill him forces him to travel to Syria. Knowing he'd probably not be back again, Paul says emotional farewells in Troas and to the Ephesian elders in Miletus.

The portion of Scripture referred to in this tutorial is: **Acts 19:11-21:11**

## Last time

After a time in Syrian Antioch, Paul set out on his third major church planting and establishing trip. After travelling across country he eventually arrived in Ephesus. There he found a handful of people who believed that Jesus is the Messiah. After he filled in some areas of truth for them that they were missing, they were baptized and God's Spirit demonstrated His permanent presence with them through miraculous signs. When Paul's teaching was rejected by the majority in the synagogue, he and the believers left and began to establish a separate identity as a local church. Paul stayed in Ephesus for at least two more years, teaching truth with widespread results through the entire region.

## God demonstrates His power

During this time of significant expansion for the Church into these predominantly non-Jewish ethnic communities in the area known as *Asia*, God is giving special abilities to His chosen representative, Paul, to validate his teaching (Acts 19:11-20). In some amazing demonstrations of God's power - unrivalled since Jesus' years of ministry and perhaps immediately after Pentecost in Jerusalem - Paul is able to heal people of sickness just by touching them or even by them touching something he's had physical contact with.

But as has been the case right down to our times, there are people who want power without the cost of being true disciples, who are glad to use the name of Jesus for their own gain, but without ever submitting in faith to His claims. Luke

records an incident that happens to some Jewish men - seven brothers in fact - that are like that. Apparently they make a living by travelling around offering to exorcise evil spirits for a fee, no doubt preying on people's gullibility. Having seen or heard about the power Paul has been given, they decide to use the name of Jesus in an incantation. But the idea backfires on them when the evil spirit who they are trying to command recognizes that, unlike Jesus and Paul, these imposters have no authority from God. He uses the man he's controlling to attack the would-be exorcists "with such violence that they fled from the house, naked and battered" Luke says.

Whether or not this episode seems bizarre or even humorous to us - with our scientific and rationalistic 21<sup>st</sup> century worldview - it certainly isn't humorous to the residents of Ephesus in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. For them, as for many people from other cultures today, trying to manipulate the spiritual world through incantations, rituals, and magic charms is a normal part of life. Even the believers, who've been born again and have God's Spirit living in them, have not up to this point understood how much they've been living according to the assumptions of their society's worldview that is dominated by Satan's deception. In many ways, their lifestyles have been a blend of the beliefs and values of their new faith, with the norms of their community. But God, who is always faithfully revealing truth to His children, now uses this incident to help the Ephesian believers clearly recognize what they've been doing. They publicly acknowledge certain evil practices and burn their incantation books that in their community are considered extremely valuable. There is no suggestion here of them needing to destroy something because of any innate evil power, but only that they are publicly and finally rejecting a system that is at odds with them trusting in God as their Father, the Son as their Saviour, and the Spirit as their Guide.

The magic books are just one of the numerous ways that Satan has devised for reinforcing the false narratives that human beings choose to believe, instead of allowing God to reveal Himself and His intentions to them. The account doesn't say, but it's possible the believers face ridicule and even harassment from their families and society for no longer participating in activities that are supposed to maintain harmony and protect everyone against harm. Whether or not they do pay this personal price on top of the financial loss, God certainly used these and similar circumstances to help drive the outward push of the Good News in the area.

## **Paul sends two young co-workers ahead**

Luke records (Acts 19:21,22) that Paul is really wanting to go to Rome, which is about 1,300 kilometers to the west of where he is currently, in Ephesus...but first he has to go back to Jerusalem, 1000 kilometers to the east. But before any of that, he's conscious of the need to visit the churches in Philippi, Thessalonica and others in Macedonia, and also those in Achaia province, primarily Corinth. There are certainly some problems in the Corinthian church

that Paul addresses in a long letter or *epistle* that he writes from Ephesus. Luke lets us know that Timothy, the young disciple from Derbe who'd been on the last trip, and another guy called *Erastus* have both been working with Paul in Asia. Although the Apostle is obviously a strong individual, we see very few instances when he's not working with others who have the same objectives. He is always looking for opportunities to entrust responsibilities to others who share the burden of the Gospel and the care of the churches. So now, he sends his two younger co-workers, Timothy and Erastus, ahead to Macedonia while he finishes up some things in Asia.

## **Resentful shrine makers cause a riot in Ephesus**

The Message Paul and others have been teaching has made significant inroads in the society, even impacting the local economy (Acts 19:23-40). For years, money has flowed into Ephesus from pilgrims coming to the celebrated temple of *Artemis*, who's widely worshipped as mother goddess of the earth. Many buy miniature shrines, usually tiny replicas of the temple made from silver, stone or clay, to take home or to bury in graves with their dead. But lately the craftsmen and merchants who profit most from this religious trade have noticed that sales have been dropping off sharply. A meeting is organized and angry speeches are made. "It's that Paul...telling people that handmade gods aren't gods at all. We'll be ruined. Artemis will lose her prestige." Their agitation flares into a riot that spreads through the city. People rush to the amphitheater, many not knowing why. Unable to locate Paul, they grab his co-workers. He's keen to go and address the angry crowd but other friends, some of them government officials, talk him out of it. After some hours, calm is eventually restored to the city.

In one form or another, on large and small scales, this kind of scenario often plays out when the Gospel begins to significantly impact a community. The long-standing systems through which people seek and maintain power, prestige and profit, are often threatened by a Message that challenges the prevailing worldview, with its associated beliefs, values and behaviour. Like Paul, other church planters often have to face this reality, knowing that how they respond to those who are threatened by them and their message has significant implications, not only for their own work, but also for any new church that is looking to them as a model. Where possible, it is important that they pursue relationships with people from all the levels in the society, as Paul clearly did. If the Gospel or the Church is seen as being only for one part of the society, then unnecessary divisions are being created and weaknesses built in. But as Jesus explained (Matthew 10:34-36), His exclusive claims implicit in the Gospel are hardly likely to bring harmony in relationships, communities and a world system that is dominated by rival claims. So, as His witnesses, although we should do everything to avoid being the source of offence or tensions, we

have to realize that we'll often be seen as a threat to those with the most invested in the existing system, particularly when we teach truth clearly.

## **Paul visits churches in Macedonia and Achaia**

Paul is finally ready to leave Ephesus (Acts 20:1-6). He heads north up the Aegean coast to Troas where he hopes to catch up with Titus. Although not mentioned by name in the Acts account, Paul will later refer to this Gentile believer as a trusted co-worker and will write him the short letter that we know from the New Testament by his name. Apparently Titus has recently been working in the church in Corinth, possibly after he went there from Ephesus, with Paul's letter that we know as First Corinthians. Now Paul is hoping to catch up with Titus on his return journey so he can find out how things are going in Corinth. Not finding him in Troas, he continues on across to Macedonia - where they do eventually meet up. After getting a somewhat encouraging report, Paul writes another letter - which we call Second Corinthians - that he probably asks Titus to deliver in person. Most of these details are not included in the Acts account but emerge from the content of the letters themselves.

Luke doesn't say how long Paul spends visiting the Macedonian churches like Philippi and Thessalonica but it could be as much as a year before he finally makes it down to Corinth for a few months. It's during this time that Paul writes his famous letter to the believers in Rome, and possibly the one to the Galatians that we have available in the New Testament. From the southern Greek province of Achaia he plans to sail to Syria along with many other Jews who'd typically be heading to Jerusalem for Passover at this time each year. But when he finds out there's a plan to kill him on board, he has to change his plans. Instead, he and his group of companions, who are taking a gift from the Gentile churches to the Judean believers, have to travel up around the Aegean coast into Macedonia. Eventually Paul is able to board a ship in Philippi. It seems as though doctor Luke might have been there working in the church since it was planted when he came there with Paul, Silas and Timothy a few years ago. Certainly that was the last time he was narrating the story as part of Paul's team, which he now begins to do again.

## **Paul visits Troas then meets the Ephesian elders**

Leaving Philippi they sail around past the narrow strait known as the *Bosphorus*, famous as the place where the continents of Europe and Asia almost touch. They land in Troas where, Luke says, they "gathered with the local believers to share in the Lord's Supper" (Acts 20:7-38). It seems that this was something the early believers regularly did as part of the goodbyes when someone was leaving for a long time...perhaps echoing the sentiment of the final, farewell meal the Lord Jesus had with His disciples before His death. Paul speaks for so long that a young man sitting on a windowsill goes to sleep


around midnight and falls to his death, but through God's power Paul is able to restore his life.

They continue their voyage, probably on coastal trading ships, hopping from port to port down the western coast of Asia. As part of the group now, Luke is able to give a detailed travelogue. Paul is hurrying to get to Jerusalem in time for the Festival of Pentecost and so decides not to spend time in Ephesus even though they pass by quite close. But when they land in Miletus, a port further down the coast, Paul sends a message asking the elders at the church in Ephesus to come and meet with him there. Although the two cities are only about 60 kilometers apart in a straight line, because of the geography, for them it probably means a rather difficult two-day journey. But these leaders gladly make the effort to see, for one last time, this man who first brought them the Gospel, taught them as young believers, and then disciplined them as they took on their leadership responsibilities in the church.

Paul's farewell address to these men is both moving and rich with potential insights as we see the things he reminds them of from his own example, and the final exhortations he leaves with them as they care for the church he has invested so much in. He says that they have seen the humility, passion, self-sacrifice, and commitment to clarity in the Gospel that has underpinned his ministry among them. He has done everything he possibly can and fulfilled his responsibility, and now they are to do the same. Like shepherds entrusted with God's precious, blood-bought sheep, they are to watch over the believers. And to feed them with the truth while vigilantly protecting them from false teaching that will inevitably threaten. There will be hard work and sacrifice involved, but as Jesus stated, those who choose to *give* end up with more than those who just want to *take*.

## **Paul and friends arrive in Tyre**

After an emotional and tearful goodbye they see him on to the ship. Luke carefully documents their progress towards Syria (Acts 21:1-14). One landfall they make at the eastern end of the Mediterranean is the port of Tyre, very close to today's Israel-Lebanon border. In both Tyre and Caesarea, Jerusalem believers with the gift of prophecy predict that Paul will be arrested if he goes to Jerusalem... everyone urges him not to go. But he declares that he is "ready not only to be jailed at Jerusalem but even die for the sake of the Lord Jesus."





## DISCUSSION POINTS

*God is with Paul as he ministers in Ephesus, Macedonia and Corinth*

1. Although Christians in our culture are unlikely to have books of incantations on their shelves or in their e-readers, can you suggest other things (tangible or not) that we continue to rely on despite saying that we depend fully on God? If not with a bonfire, then what do you think might be *our* starting point for dealing with those things?
2. Describe what you think the battle with Satan and his power looks like for us today. Do you feel it is substantially very different here in our society than in other places that are less culturally 'Christian'? Please explain.
3. Can you picture yourself being part of an effort to plant a church in an area like Ephesus where the Gospel has not previously been accessible to the community? If *not*, can you reflect on the reasons. If *so*, put in your own words what would you like to be able to say to your friends there if you were leaving for the last time.



## ACTIVITIES

*God is with Paul as he ministers in Ephesus, Macedonia and Corinth*

1. Study maps of the Mediterranean around the time of the Acts Narrative until you're able to correctly identify most of these places on the blank map below; Antioch in Syria, Tarsus, Damascus, Corinth, Ephesus, Thessalonica, Philippi, Athens, Colossae, Iconium and Troas.

