

Text: Ac 19.13-17

Proposition: Spiritual power that overcomes the powers in this world belongs only to those who belong to Christ.

Last week we talked about Paul's miracles in Ephesus and how they confirm the apostolic authority God gave to Paul. That is an important component of our doctrine of inspiration.

We continue with the theme this week, with an episode that is humorous. One of my commentaries said,

"Luke must have enjoyed writing this episode."¹

I think you will agree when we read the passage.

One thing I mentioned last time, however, was the difference between magic and miracles. Here were the two points

1. Magic seeks to manipulate the gods to get the desired results; miracles are a sovereign act of God through an agent
2. Magic includes rituals/spells, etc to stir the god to action; miracles come at the will of the agent without manipulation

Our passage today turns to the surrounding culture of the 1st century. When we think of that era and the Roman Empire, perhaps we think of the great civilization the Greeks and Romans achieved.

- Rule of law
- Great philosophy
- Excellent engineering and architecture (Romans especially)
- System of government

We often forget that the civilization of the 1st century was also pagan. Idol worship and a multiplicity of gods abounded. With that came much superstition and occult practice.

- With the occult came the practice of magic

It is jarring to think of a great civilization captured by this kind of superstition.

¹ John B. Polhill, *Acts*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 404.

However, we should not think our civilization is much better. Do a little reading into contemporary philosophy and you will soon see what I mean.

Well, back to the magic. When Paul showed up in Ephesus and performed many miracles, this superstitious and occult oriented society took notice, also noticing something different about Paul's miracles.

Read Acts 19.11-17

One more introductory word: The demon possessed man asked the false exorcists, "Who are you?" Today, I want to ask us that question. "Who are you?"

- Are you one who walks with God, whom the powers of evil respect?
- Or are you someone they don't recognize at all?

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I. The ancient world and magic

A. The corruption of truth into the obscurity of idolatry and magic

Rm 1.21-23 For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. ²² Professing to be wise, they became fools, ²³ and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.

1. Mankind started out with a knowledge of God
 - a. Adam
 - b. Noah
2. Yet man did not honor God, instead turning to empty speculations
3. Consequence: darkness
 - a. Darkness imagines deity in mysterious powers
 - b. Darkness imagines significance in detestable images

The city of Ephesus, a center of trade and prosperity in the Roman Empire, nonetheless was dominated by idolatry.

“Ephesus also maintained its religious importance under Roman rule. It became a centre of the emperor cult, and eventually possessed three official temples, thus qualifying thrice over for the proud title *neōkoros* (‘temple-warden’) of the emperors, as well as being *neōkoros* of Artemis (Acts 19:35).”²

“one kind of magic formula was actually called *Ephesia grammata*”³

B. Idolatry led to magic: the means of manipulating the gods to gain favors (magic) or insight (divination)

1. Magic defined:

“Magic is an attempt by human beings to compel a divinity, by the use of physical means, to do what they wish that divinity to do.”⁴

2. We saw in Acts 8 the person of Simon Magus (Simon the Magician) who sought to purchase the power of the Holy Spirit

“Magicians and charlatans were omnipresent in the culture, offering various cures and blessings by their spells and incantations, all for a financial consideration.”⁵

C. Jewish involvement in magic

1. The Jews avoided pronouncing the name of God (YHWH)

- a. Pagans, aware of this, assumed the name of God had special power (a misinterpretation)
- b. Pagans developed “magical incantations” based on their imaginations about the name of the Hebrew God

² E. M. B. Green and C. J. Hemer, “Ephesus,” D. R. W. Wood and I. Howard Marshall, *New Bible Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 328.

³ E. M. B. Green and C. J. Hemer, “Ephesus,” D. R. W. Wood and I. Howard Marshall, *New Bible Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 328.

⁴ Paul J. Achtemeier, ed., *Harper’s Bible Dictionary*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 594.

⁵ Polhill, *Acts*, 403.

2. Some Jews actively involved in exorcism (mentioned by Jesus in Mt 12.27)
 - a. Pagans often respected Jewish exorcists, thinking their “incantations” were especially powerful
 - b. Magicians of all kinds, including Jewish exorcists, found their “skills” very profitable

So much for the culture of the day, more information than we really desire or need to have.

II. These Jewish exorcists

A. The sons of Sceva

1. Our text identifies Sceva as “a Jewish chief priest”
2. Problem: Josephus provides a list of chief priests in the temple up to the destruction of the temple in AD 70 — no Sceva

“Evidently the scribes of the Western text were the first to note this, for they altered the text to simply read ‘priest,’ not ‘high priest.’”⁶

3. Various solutions:

- a. Left off the list somehow?
- b. Or means he is head of a priestly family?
- c. Or he just made it up...

“... more probably ‘Jewish chief priest’ ... was his self-designation, set out on a placard: Luke might have placed the words between quotation marks had these been invented in his day.”⁷

B. These men attempted to co-opt the name of Jesus

1. No doubt they witnessed the real miracles of the apostle (v. 12)
2. They decided the name itself was the power behind these miracles

⁶ Polhill, *Acts*, 403–4.

⁷ Bruce, *Acts*, 368.

C. The amusing results

1. The evil spirit's famous answer (15)

a. Lit. "Jesus I know" (Jesus in emphatic position)

b. Lit. "Paul I recognize"

Possibly the verbs are just synonymous, but they are different.

c. Lit. "YOU who are"

The Gk uses emphatic position throughout, you can almost here the demonic sneer. "Who do you think you are"

2. The man sets on the exorcists (16)

a. Verbs piled on top of each other to emphasize the violence

1) Leaped on them

2) Subdued them

3) Overpowered them

b. So that they fled "naked and wounded" (*i.e.* clothed in rags at this point)

"The shame of their resultant condition, fleeing naked and wounded, underscores their complete lack of success."⁸

III. The fame of the true God (17)

The final comment brings us to the point of this section

A. The impression on Ephesus (and the whole region)

1. Paul's many miracles made their own impression (11-12)

2. The embarrassment of these charlatans made another impression

a. The whole of the population – Jews *and* Greeks (*i.e.* everybody) knew about this

⁸ Bock, Acts, 604.

- b. The event no doubt was the “talk of the town” – with many a joke passed around
3. The name of the Lord Jesus magnified
 - a. The difference between Paul and the sons of Sceva duly noted
 - b. The fear of God affected all who heard and saw
 - c. Paul’s preaching gained greater significance

This doesn’t mean a “mass conversion” but increasing attention and respect

And finally, the point of our message

B. Who are you?

1. Have you bowed before the name of Jesus Christ?
2. Is your life evidence of a temperament transformed by the Holy Spirit?
 - a. Think of the works of the flesh in Gal 5 (list emphasizes anger)
 - b. Overall, are you walking in the light and filled with the joy of the Spirit?
3. What is your testimony?

When you witness, to people respond, “who are you,” or “how great is your God”?

Note: the response of people isn’t entirely up to you, but the way you live your life as a disciple of Christ is up to you.

Conclusion:

Proposition: Spiritual power that overcomes the powers in this world belongs only to those who belong to Christ.

We ought to walk close to God so that people respect our God when they watch us.

May God help us to walk by the Spirit, have victory over our passions, and display the glory of the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.