

Does this limerick resonate with you?:

*“Our race had a splendid beginning,
But man spoiled his chances by sinning.
We hope that the story
Will end in God’s glory,
But at present the other side’s winning.”*

It often seems to us that the power of God is no match for the troubles of our present world. ... Considering the degradation of our culture and the violence that we have been seeing (some of the latest being the shooting in San Bernadino this past week.) Evil appears to be rising everywhere... it seems as if the other side is winning.

Did you happen to see the headline of the New York Daily News this past Thursday...? **“God’s Not Fixing This”**...? ... It was an “in-your-face-article” taking issue with the House Speaker... Paul Ryan... and presidential hopefuls Rand Paul... Ted Cruz... Jeb Bush... and Lindsey Graham... who all responded to the attack in Southern California with tweets about “praying” for the victims of San Bernardino.

Evil is taking command... and the world is mocking... *“Where is your God?”* ... *“Where is the promise of His coming?”* ... *“Waiting on God is not the answer...”* ... The Godless news media would like for us to believe that they have better solutions... (in the case of the New York Daily News... they write that it is the human effort of enacting MUCH stronger gun control)... and that believing in God and prayer are part of the problem...!

The result of such media articles... is that unbelievers are pushed even further away from the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ... And the effect of

such audacity by the media... (to mock us... without much... if any repercussion...)... and the actual events (like the massacre in San Bernadino)... can be very devastating... on believers like you and I ... It can shame us into abandoning all hope that God's power can... (or will)... do anything for us personally... because evil seems to be so powerful... and God seems so silent.

Perhaps we have not yet lost our hope of going to heaven... but seeing what appears to be... that the other side is winning right now... it's hard to believe that God has things under His control at the moment. ... Even worse... we begin to doubt anything good can come of our personal sorrows — hard family circumstances... (a son or daughter who has gone wayward)... depression... (perhaps rising out of anxiety over finances or health concerns)... addictions... (to pornography... gambling... or substance abuse)... or whatever we are up against. God's power doesn't seem to be available or strong enough for Him to act on our behalf.

This morning I want to affirm the exact opposite... of what the world wants us to think... given the events of this past week... especially. ... We come to a passage of Scripture in our study through Acts... that I think is perfect for accomplishing this.

We're going to look at a detailed account that takes place in the city of Ephesus... as we move into chapter 19.... in our study through the Book of Acts. ... The point of our passage is so simple: **God's power is absolute.** And what I will say next... I hope will receive a hearty "AMEN" from you... Nothing has changed on that since the 1st Century!

Nothing that has discouraged us is ultimately going to prevail. (You can say “Amen” to that... as well... if you want to...) ... We need to be reminded that there are reasons to be hopeful - rather than discouraged. ... If you feel like quitting or giving up... you do not need to stay defeated.

One good reason to study the book of Acts... is that the world of ancient Rome was similar to ours. It was as arrogant... and degraded... just as the media gleefully shouts ours to be. ... It had false religion... powerful Godless thugs... injustice... government corruption... poverty... and disease — all problems we have in our world.

Yet ordinary people with a clear message of a risen Savior began to advance on that world... and they saw it change. ... In the text we’re going to look at... we’ll see an entire city... and the region it was in... changed by the truth of the Gospel. ... When we read these stories... it important for us to bear in mind that **God’s power is absolute and nothing has changed on that since the 1st Century.**

Here is our overall theme for this passage... and by the way... it is our theme for the entire Christmas month of December...

John 1:4-5 (ESV)

In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

Before we get to today’s passage in Acts... let me do a little setting up...

The Apostle Paul had finished his 2nd missionary journey... dropped Aquilla and Pricilla off in Ephesus... but could not himself stay there long... because he had taken a voluntary vow (expressing his thanksgiving to

God)... and needed to get to Jerusalem to complete its requirements. He promised to return... when he could... to Ephesus. ... After his brief time in Jerusalem... Paul returned to his sending church in Antioch. It is not known how long Paul stayed in Antioch before he departed for his 3rd missionary journey... but most think that it was probably a year. ... There is not much that Luke says about this here in Acts... because Luke wants to get us to Paul's return to Ephesus. The incredible things that happened there is the next focus of the author of Acts. He wants to share the marvelous ministry God gave to Paul in that strategic city... which was so steeped in idolatry and the occult.

Ephesus... with its 300,000 inhabitants... was the capital city of the Roman province of Asia... and its most important commercial center. ... Thanks to a large harbor... Ephesus grew wealthy on trade... and... thanks to the temple of Diana... it attracted hosts of visitors who wanted to see this building (which today is designated as one of the seven wonders of the world.)

The temple was probably already four hundred years old in Paul's day. It had 100 columns that stood over 50 feet high. ... In the sacred enclosure of the temple stood the "sacred image" of Artemis (also known as Diana)... that was supposed to have fallen from heaven It was probably a meteorite. Since Artemis was a fertility goddess... cultic prostitution was a primary part of her worship... and hundreds of "priestesses" were available in the temple.

Ephesus became a collecting place for superstition and the dark arts. It was a cesspool of the occult. ... Later on... when Paul moved on from there... he wrote to the church there in Ephesus...

Ephesians 6:12 (ESV)

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.

Ephesus was the waterhole for every kind of (black magic) magician... witch... clairvoyant... and criminal. ... Con artists... murderers... and perverts... all found the permissible climate of Ephesus unusually agreeable. ...That city was a dark center of evil.

Paul's stay in Ephesus lasted three years. This is the longest he stayed in any city. His time here was exciting and fruitful.

John 1:5 (ESV)

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

Now let's turn to today's passage...

Acts 19:1-7

Paul has just arrived in Ephesus to begin a major evangelistic effort. Priscilla and Aquila (who Paul had left in Ephesus... about a year prior...) have perhaps already established a house church and laid the groundwork... but Paul's arrival will trigger the major thrust. ... As he proclaims repentance in the face of the kingdom of God... he was probably informed that there are other "disciples" in the area... who are proclaiming repentance.

On meeting them Paul apparently sensed something different about them... so he asks the diagnostic question that we read of in verse 2... *"Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed..."*

This is certainly not the question we are prone to ask today... Is it...? ... And perhaps if we did... we might get the same answer from modern churchgoers. *“Um... No... we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit... We thought this was about doing good works... cleaning up our life a little... repenting... telling God we’re sorry... and then perhaps levelling out our good works with the bad things we’ve done in our life...”*

Paul then takes a step backward and asks a second diagnostic question about their baptism... another question that sounds strange today.

They had been baptized with John's baptism. ... John's baptism only pointed forward to Jesus. ... Paul re-baptizes them... with a baptism that points back to Jesus... what He accomplished through His death burial and resurrection... and what belief in that accomplishes for us. Paul also placed his hands on them... and they receive the Spirit... prophesying and speaking in tongues.

So much happens in these verses that have been the subject of so much controversy... and church splits... through the ages. In discussing these events... I want to keep it in the context of what the Book of Acts is about... and what the immediate need was in Ephesus.

The book of Acts DESCRIBES how God established His church here on earth. It is a description... and we must be careful that we not automatically assume it is a prescription... assuming it is to be the normal for us. Historical narrative does not work that way. ... Acts is a time of transition... from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant. ... It is a time of transition when God was establishing Apostolic authority. The message of the

Apostles was being authenticated. Today... messages are authenticated by what...? What do we now have... that they did not have at the time of Paul's third missionary journey...? - SCRIPTURE... specifically... the New Testament.

And the immediate need in Ephesus... was this... Twelve men... who only knew the baptism of John... were about to be made the nucleus of the thriving church in Ephesus. ...

Let's take a look at the baptism of John... as Matthew recorded it...

Matthew 3:11 (ESV)

"I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

The baptism of John concerned itself with looking forward to Jesus. The baptism of Jesus will be with the Holy Spirit and fire. These twelve men were anticipating a future baptism that would evidence the Holy Spirit and dramatic power. These future leaders of the church at Ephesus were given just that!

They also needed a special link to Apostolic authority (which you and I have in Scripture.) This linked them to the authority of the Apostle Paul... not just to John or to Apollos (who was sent to Corinth.)

Let me quote Warren Wiersbe about the events we have just read in our passage...

What God did through Paul for these twelve men was not normative for the church today. How do we know? Because it was not repeated. The people who were converted in Ephesus under Paul's ministry all

received the gift of the Holy Spirit when they trusted the Saviour. Paul makes this clear in Ephesians 1:13-14, and this is the pattern for us today.

In Acts 19:6, we have the last instance of the gift of tongues in the Book of Acts. The believers spoke in tongues at Pentecost and praised God, and their listeners recognized these tongues as known languages (Acts 2:4-11) and not as some "heavenly speech." The Gentile believers in the house of Cornelius also spoke in tongues (Acts 10:44-46), and their experience was identical to that of the Jews in Acts 2 (see Acts 11:15). This was of historic significance since the Spirit was baptizing Jews (Acts 2) and Gentiles (Acts 10) into the body of Christ (see 1 Cor. 12:13).

Today, the gift of tongues is not an evidence of the baptism of the Spirit or the fullness of the Spirit. Paul asked, "Do all speak with tongues?" (1 Cor. 12:30) and the Greek construction demands no as an answer. When Paul wrote to his Ephesian friends about the filling of the Holy Spirit, he said nothing about tongues (Eph. 5:18ff). Nowhere in Scripture are we admonished to seek a baptism of the Holy Spirit, or to speak in tongues, but we are commanded to be filled with the Spirit. Read Paul's letter to the Ephesian church and note the many references to the Holy Spirit of God and His work in the believer.

But Paul's asking of these men if they had received the Holy Spirit demonstrates a principle that is clearly taught in other places of Scripture: **The presence of the Holy Spirit is indispensable proof that a person is truly born again ...** (Here is just one of those other places...)

Romans 8:9 (ESV)

You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.

Take special notice here about these twelve men. ... They believed in the coming Messiah (as preached by John)... and they had even repented

(they cleaned up their lives and turned from their sin to God.) ... But they still lacked the presence of Christ... that is... of the Holy Spirit in their lives. How many people are in our churches today... who may have changed their lives... and are now living moral lives... but do not have the presence of the Holy Spirit living inside of them...?

When Paul met these 12 men... their lack was visible. They were not bearing the presence and fruit of the Holy Spirit in their lives. The issue for Paul (and it ought to be for us) is that believers know that they have the Holy Spirit. ... The issue is not HOW the Holy Spirit manifests Himself in us. We can argue until the cows come home whether or not He manifests Himself today by making people speak in tongues. The issue is – have you received the Holy Spirit as indisputable evidence that you are saved...?

Are you drawn to God's Word...? Do you love what God loves...? Do you love His church and want to see people built up in the faith...? Are you being used by Him in some capacity for winning the lost and strengthening His saints...? Is He transforming you into the image of Christ...?

Now... how does all of this relate to the opening of today's message...? What does this have to do with the fact that God's power is **absolute** even though the world around us is such a mess...? ... I believe that in our day... God will be showing more of His power to this world... by awakening more of His people in His church to the presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives. Is He calling you to check and see if the Holy Spirit is present...? And if He is... Is God asking you today to start paying more attention to His leading in your life...?

Acts 19:8

Paul was speaking boldly about the Kingdom of God. He spoke with assurance. ... He was not unsure about his beliefs. That attitude is not the case with those who ignore the presence and leading of the Holy Spirit in their life. ... Doubt is honored instead of certainty. Being careful not to offend others with the truth of the Gospel takes priority.

Acts 19:9

Here is more of what paying attention to the Holy Spirit's presence and leading looks like. Paul left the synagogue because he was no longer accepted there.

Scripture gives at least three causes why he was no longer accepted at the synagogue. ... **First**, the unyielding attitude. (Verse 9)... *"When some became stubborn"*. ... Many in the synagogue simply refused to accept anything Paul was saying. ... When people become stubborn in rejecting the Gospel... it is time to move on to others.

Second, the unbelieving hearts. *"and continued in unbelief."* ... Unbelief had become so strong (it was part of the stubbornness) that Paul had to move on. When mankind refuses adamantly to believe the Gospel... the Holy Spirit moves us on.

Third, the unholy mouths. *"Speaking evil of that way before the congregation."* ... It was not enough to stubbornly refuse the Gospel ... but these unbelievers resorted to unholy mouths and spread evil about the Gospel... and they did it before the congregation... that is... they made sure as many people as possible heard their evil slander about the Gospel.

On the surface... this move to the halls of Tyrannus does not seem very significant. ... But this change shows Paul's aggressiveness and determination in assaulting the powers of darkness.

Paul lectured daily according to verse 9... and according to Acts 20:34... he also still worked his job as a tent-maker... when he was at Ephesus. When he spoke to the Elders of the church at Ephesus he said this...

Acts 20:34 (ESV)

You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me.

Paul kept a killer schedule! He worked to support the missionary team... and he lectured daily in the halls of Tyrannus. And look at the results!

Acts 19:10

Paul had a lengthy ministry in Ephesus. The total was three years... as I have noted earlier. ... Of those three years of his ministry... two years of it was done out of the building where the school of Tyrannus met (a lecture hall that he probably rented.)

Ephesus was a cosmopolitan center from which Gospel would spread quickly... especially if Paul were training disciples (at this lecture hall) and sending them out to spread the message.

God's power is absolute and nothing has changed on that since the 1st Century.

Now... before we move on... let me also say again that Ephesus was a hotbed of the occult including all forms of Spiritism... magic... superstition...

and the black arts. ... The people were an emotional group of people... very sensual... and easily moved to feelings and to belief in spectacular magical appearances. ... Dazzling extravaganza was necessary... in order to get through to this culture. ... As always... God does everything He can to reach a people. ... Very simply stated... these "special miracles" that we are about to read... show the great love and desire to communicate with men... that God has.

Acts 19:11-12

What were these handkerchiefs and aprons which are mentioned here?

Well... actually we could call them "sweat cloths." ... That is what the word in the original language of the New Testament literally means. And once we understand this... and another cultural fact about 1st Century Ephesus... we get a much better idea of what was going on here.

Paul would have used sweat cloths as he worked in his leather trade. (Tent-making is the term for all leather work.) Ephesus was in a warm climate. ... So while he was working... Paul would be perspiring. He would use these cloths... these handkerchiefs and aprons... to wipe his brow. They were dirty. They had perspiration from his body on them.

Now here is the cultural fact that is needed for our understanding. ... In that area there were the mystery religions... which all used white garments... and emphasized that everything must be very clean and white. ... Everything had to be just so.

So what was God doing...? He was rebuking those false religions of the area. God used these dirty sweaty cloths to heal people. It pointed to a greater power than their local religions.

This reveals the special power that was granted to the apostle Paul. ... Notice how verse 11 says that God was doing extraordinary miracles. (Now... every miracle – by definition – is something that is extraordinary. So what Paul was doing in Ephesus was extraordinarily extraordinary...) I think that it is safe for us to conclude that this is the only incident of sweat cloths healing people that ever took place -- including the day in which we live. God enabled Paul to perform "special miracles" because Ephesus was a center for the occult... and Paul was demonstrating God's power right in the middle of Satan's territory.

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Wherever God's people minister the truth... Satan sends a counterfeit to oppose the work. ... Satan imitates whatever God's people are doing, because he knows that the unsaved world cannot tell the difference.

Acts 19:13-17

Exorcists were common throughout the ancient world. ... Many were vagabonds... living as strolling gypsies. ... They lived a circus-type life... making a living off the superstitions of people. ... These Jews traveled from town to town claiming to heal people and drive out demons. ... Often they would recite a whole list of names in their incantation to be sure of including the right deity.

There are records of extensive ceremonies and spoken formulas that Jewish people in the first century used to try to free themselves from the influence of evil spirits, but it is unlikely that these were very effective, since the people were astounded when Jesus was able to cast out demons with “authority and power” (Luke 4:36).

The sons of Sceva were impressed by Paul, whose power to drive out demons came from God's Holy Spirit, not from witchcraft, and was obviously more powerful than theirs. They discovered, however, that no one can control or duplicate God's power. These men were calling on the name of Jesus without knowing him personally. The power to change people comes from Christ. It cannot be tapped by reciting his name like a magic charm. God works his power only through those he chooses.

This incident indicates that Paul, the humble leatherworker, has more power than the magicians. **God’s power is absolute and nothing has changed on that since the 1st Century.**

The harm done to those who would mimic Paul's ministry put considerable and healthy fear in the lives of the observers. It was not the extraordinary miracles that brought on this healthy fear... but the knowledge that some who tried to use Jesus' name had been judged.

Acts 19:18-20

Notice that it was professing believers... who still clung to their old sinful practices... that were effected. ... They denounced it in their lives.

The connection is undeniable: when the church seriously cleanses itself... God is seen for who He really is. God has absolute power in this world.

What would be burned today if the Spirit's conviction swept the church?

I think some magazines would be quietly removed from out-of-the-way desk drawers... or certain novels from the family bookshelves. ... Perhaps some television channels... and internet porn sites would be boycotted.

If God were to move like this today... I am convinced that believers would ask others to pray that they would be set free from whatever is dragging them down. ... And many would come to Christ for forgiveness of sin and deliverance from the eternal wrath of God.

This can still happen! **God's power is absolute and nothing has changed on that since the 1st Century.** ... Our world is a mess. I think that God is waiting for the church to make a confessional move like the church in Ephesus.

What we have seen in today's passage is that the Word of God came out the winner in this combat with evil. **It always will.** (Can I get another "Amen"?) ... Sometimes it looks like evil will prevail... but God's Word will always prevail in the end.

The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard is often very difficult to read. (I do not agree with his beliefs about the nature of Christ...) ... But his parable of the wild duck is a superb illustration of how the soul declines from its ideals and becomes satisfied with lower standards.

Flying northward across Europe with his friends one spring... a certain duck landed in a Danish barnyard where there were tame ducks. ... Enjoying some of their corn... he stayed for an hour... then a day... then a week... then a month. ... Finally... relishing the good fare and safety of the barnyard... he stayed all summer.

One autumn day when his wild-duck friends were winging their way southward again... they passed over the barnyard... and the duck heard their cries. ... He felt the thrill of joy and delight... and with a great flapping of wings... he rose in the air to join his old comrades in their flight.

But he found that his good fare had made him so soft and heavy... he could rise no higher than the eaves of the barn. ... So he dropped back again to the barnyard and said to himself... "*Oh well, my life is safe here, and the food is good.*"

Every spring and autumn when he heard the wild ducks honking... his eyes would gleam for a moment and he would begin to flap his wings. But finally the day came when the wild ducks flew over him and uttered their cry... but he paid not the slightest attention to them.

If God is calling us, whether for salvation or for increased service, by all means we ought to respond *now*. ... Perhaps He is asking you to pay closer attention to the presence and leading of the Holy Spirit in your life... Or maybe He is calling you to confess and lay aside some wrongful entertainments... or habits. We must respond with a life-giving, "Yes, Lord!" while we can still hear his voice. ... The Word of God will always

come out the winner – even though... for a season... it may look like the other side is winning.

