

Title: Miraculous, Not Magic
Text: Acts 19:11-20
Theme: The uneasy reality of supernatural power
Series: Acts
Prop Stmtnt: The reality of supernatural power is a phenomenon that rightly points the
existence of Satan and the power of Christ.

On Friday, Cathi and I went to the memorial service for her aunt. Suffering and dying has a way of revealing what we really believe because we are trying to make sense of life, our lives and those around us. Why, why, why? Why are you going through what you experiencing? Why are you the way you are? Why do you respond, think, feel the way you do? We spend a lifetime trying to sort ourselves out and one another.

The Bible tells us that you are born into a drama, a story, a plan that God designed and is carrying out that goes back for thousands of years and will go for eternity. And while God has made us as rational and intelligent creatures, we simply do not have the bandwidth to comprehend all of the plans and purposes of God. But, they are real. Which means that your life is real. Your life has a part to play in God's drama. You are not meaningless and there is no such thing as meaninglessness. Our world is creation. There is a Creator whose design reveals a level of intelligence that is awesome in the purest sense of the word. Therefore, history is going somewhere. When the Bible tells us the story of the advancement of the gospel and the spread of the churches being planted throughout the Roman Empire (as it does here in the book of Acts), it is telling us history that has a purpose and there are times when the story itself reveals layers to our reality that help us realize that there is more to this world than what we normally see. This morning, my goal in preaching this text is to help you see your life and this life through Supernatural lenses so you will trust Christ more fully, and live your life more intentionally.

Read Text:

Science can explain a lot of things but not everything. Science coupled with technology can examine the molecular life of bacteria and discover intricately detailed and engineered processes in those cells that are so incredibly sophisticated that they will leave you speechless. Science can inform you of what that cell is doing, but it cannot tell you who designed it to function like that and how it got to that level of detail. Even in the natural world, there are limits to what science can tell us. In the supernatural world, science is way out of its depth. For those who think that we live in a closed universe where everything can be explained by a Petri dish, paranormal activity is a major inconvenience that tends to be ignored simply because it cannot be understood. But, the reality of demonic activity is not ignored throughout the Scriptures. It is addressed as a reality that, at the very least reminds us that there is a lot more going on in our world than what we can view through a telescope, microscope or drone.

The reality of the demonic and angelic world is like the opening of a door that reveals a world that many do not know what to do with, so they just try to keep the door closed and ignore it as much as possible. The Bible speaks of the reality of angelic beings, both elect and fallen as natural and normal as it speaks of the reality of human beings. This is all part of our world. But, angelic beings freak us out. And for good reason, but especially for those who want to live under

the delusion that there is no God, no Satan, no heaven and no hell. For them, evolution is a convenient delusion that gives one the appearance of an acceptable cover to reject the notion that there is absolute truth. But, how do you explain the existence of evil spirits (demons) without accepting the reality of evil? The sad truth is, most people, it seems would rather live with an inconsistent and at times incoherent view of the world rather than acknowledge, trust and submit to Christ.

What possible defense does one have before demons? The young men in our text found out in a terrifying way that they were playing with a lion they could not tame. But, when you look at this text as a whole (11-20) there is an obvious theme and it is not the power of evil, but the power of the gospel. The power of the gospel is supernatural and it is supernaturally more powerful than the supernatural power of evil. The way that Luke moves from one scene to another and explains this helps us realize how much he wants us to see the difference between a miracle from God and magic. And this is a very important issue. The story of our world is the story of people who will worship anything if it promises to give them what they want. A person who is desperate enough for power, for control, for glory, for success, for health, for admiration, for relief, for pleasure will try anything and do anything to get it. But, this text forces you to face the fact that what you worship, what you really believe and follow is not neutral. The good news is that your life has meaning. You are here with a purpose. But, that also means that there is a lot more going on than you realize and there is a lot at stake. We are in a war. This is no game. There is no middle ground and there is no truce. You play with, flirt with, cooperate with and underestimate the power of the enemy to the peril of your soul. But, the power of the enemy is no match for the power of the gospel. This is displayed in four ways:

I. The power of God displayed through Paul. (11-12)

The Apostle Paul is in the city of Ephesus (map) and is having a fruitful ministry. God was doing extraordinary things by the hands of Paul and Luke makes this very clear from the grammar. God is the subject. Paul is merely the tool in the hand of God. This is so different than the self-promoting charlatans we witness today. The results of these healings are not that Paul's mailing list and fundraising efforts hit all-time records, but that "the name of the Lord Jesus was extolled"¹ (17) and "the Word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily" (20). The things that Paul was doing was not normal even for that time. We do not see Paul doing this sort of thing to this level in the other towns. That is why Luke says that God was doing extraordinary things. Paul is back in business with Aquila and Priscilla; his tent-making team. It is likely that they worked the business in the morning until time for Paul to go to the hall of Tyrannus where he would lecture for several hours before returning back to the business. The specific words that Luke uses here sounds as if, people started using the rags that Paul had used like a do-rag, or sweat rag, or hand rag, and started placing them on people who were sick and they were healed. This is not something that normally happens to Paul, but God is clearly the one doing this so that there would be a lot of attention given to this man, so people would hear what he had to say about Christ. The miracle of God is clearly superior to the magic they were familiar with. Today, we are rightfully disgusted and nauseated with the charlatans who sell their miracle healing cloths on TV for a sizable donation. In some cases, there is a polar opposite response that tends to be suspicious about any miraculous activity, but both extremes have to be avoided. While God does not do miracles all of the time and our faith is not built upon, nor sustained by miracles,

God can and will do miraculous things when He chooses to. Even in this account, God is the actor and Paul is presented as the passive vehicle that God uses.

Ephesus had a lot of superstition, magic, and spiritism, so God was taking the battle right into plain view. The message is clear. Jesus is not another god, another philosophy and a hot new trend. He is God. He is the only Savior. The only other time this sort of healing activity was seen was through Peter in Jerusalem and that, like this seemed to have been only for a season. Miracles are real, but they are real miracles. God used this to draw attention to the message of the gospel. And God does not use miracles all the time. They are for specific reasons in specific situations. Part of the reason for that is that miracles do not cause faith. They get attention. Faith comes by hearing and hearing through the message of Christ. People who are converted by miracles tend to be converted to miracles. In other words, if the miracle is the reason why they commit to Christ, as soon as the miracle is done, so is their commitment. This is very important to grasp. Many people are only interested in the miracle and they don't care where it comes from. If Jesus gives out miracles, well, "praise Jesus." If Satan can do some magic, well, "praise him." If Baal can make it rain, or Asherah can give me children, then I will praise and worship them. This is the history of our world. Our Baals are education, science, careers and anything else that will give us what we want. Jesus is not in competition with any other god. He is God and will not share his glory with another.

The performing of miracles was not the reason why Paul was there. The goal was not the miracles, but the establishment of a healthy church. The miracles were like a billboard that advertised the message. Through Paul, diseases were healed in ways that defied logical answers. A great power is clearly at work. In addition, there was demonic activity. When handkerchiefs or aprons that Paul had touched were placed upon people, they were healed and those who were under the influence of evil spirits were freed. There was instant evidence of supernatural authority through Paul. Physical issues (sickness) and non-physical issues (evil spirits) were both under the authority of this man.

This is interesting in view of what is going on here in Ephesus. Luke informs us that this aspect of Paul's ministry took place after he was basically rejected from the synagogue and began teaching in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. The text does not say if this ministry of healing lasted for the entire two years, or was just for a season. But, however it lasted, this much was clear: The message that Paul was preaching had a supernatural authority to it that forced any reasonable person to have to figure out what this was about. Supernatural power is designed to open your eyes to another world, so that you realize that there is way more to your life than what you can immediately see. Supernatural power is not a game to play, or something to toy with. The seven sons of one man were about to find this out

II. The power of Christ displayed through a demonic encounter. (13-17)

Simon the magician was in Samaria (Acts 8) when he witnessed the power of God through Philip. Simon saw what this power did and he wanted that power for himself. God does not entrust this power to many for, in my opinion, most people cannot handle it. People who want this power to show what they can do (even if it is good) miss the point. The point of the power is not to make yourself something, but only to authenticate the message of Christ.

In Ephesus, there were some Jewish, itinerant exorcists, which I take to mean, guys who would come into town and for a fee, or at least for a show and would either cast demons out of people or pretend to. This was their shtick and it seemed to work until they saw what Paul was doing. When they saw the authority that Paul wielded, they wanted that, because it was clearly at a higher level than what they had used. They decided to get in on the act. So, as part of their exorcisms they would say, *"I adjure you by the name of Jesus whom Paul proclaims."* Isn't that ironic? Paul had been rejected by many of the Jews and was no longer welcome in the synagogue. They didn't want to hear his message. So, now there are these other Jews, who do not believe the message of Paul, but want to use the message of Paul for their own advancement. Of course all that they do is help make Christ known.

There was or had been a Jewish high priest by the name of Sceva, who had 7 sons. Sceva was from one of the families from which high priests in Jerusalem were chosen. In clear violation of the OT law these boys dabbled in exorcisms and were a long way from Jerusalem. They were part of the group of itinerant Jewish exorcists who were doing this, at least pretended to be doing this when they encountered a demon who was not impressed with them when they commanded him to leave based on the name of Jesus whom Paul was talking about, the response of the demon is telling: *"Jesus I know and Paul I recognize, but who are you?"* Satan and his demons know the truth. And this is why they are terrifying. They know the truth and will use it against you. They know the truth and will lie. This demon exposed these guys as imposters. The imposter was exposing other imposters. The name of Jesus has authority only to those who believe in his name. He will not be used by those who do not trust him. Jesus is not a rabbit's foot. In other words, you don't have the right to use this name and therefore I am not under any obligation to do what you say. In fact, since you do not have the right to use this name, you are actually under my power. These guys treated Jesus as some kind of magic spell, like a Harry Potter formula. It did not work. They were no match for this power - no one is on their own.

Jesus is known in the underworld and those who identify with Jesus are known as well. The message of the demon is clear. If Jesus said the word, or if Paul said the word, then I would have to leave. But, you have no power over me, and therefore, I have power over you. The forces of spiritual darkness tremble before the smallest saint who is clothed in the gospel.

Playing with demons is not a game. And these men and the entire city found out when these guys were attacked and beaten and had their clothes ripped off. They were literally exposed for what they were. They had no covering. They had no defense. They had no protection. Without trust in Jesus, you have no defense before the evil of this world and the evil of this world plays for keeps. Word spread throughout the city of what happened to these men. The affect was known *"to all the residents of Ephesus (notice) BOTH JEWS and GREEKS. And fear fell upon them all, and the name of the Lord Jesus was extolled"*

III. The power of the gospel displayed through heart and house cleansing. (18-19)

In 1519, Hernan Cortes landed in Veracruz from Spain to begin his conquest of the Aztec Empire. Having crossed the Atlantic, he ordered his men to burn the ships that brought them there. It is easy to imagine that one of the men laughed in disbelief until he was impaled by the

captain, at which time the rest immediately scampered to carry out the audacious command. The point was made. We are not going back. There will be no retreat. You cannot retreat when there is no option to do so.

There were in Ephesus, many people who had now professed faith in Christ. But these were people who had ever since they could remember relied upon occultist tools for health, wealth and favor. These tarot cards, ouija boards, black magic books and other things were stored in their homes as part of their past. Perhaps if this Jesus thing didn't work out, they could go back. Now, faced with the reality of how evil, evil really is, these new believers started cleaning out their homes of these things. They were burning the boats and by doing so, they were making a powerful statement: their hope was in Christ. There was no going back. You cannot retreat to your old ways, when the option to do so is taken away.

If you are serious about purity, burn the boats and put a filter on your smart phone, tablet and other devices. If you are serious about not going back to your old life of addiction, make a commitment to talk to someone today before you leave about how to remove any retreat as an option. What app do you need to get rid of? What indulgence do you justify as your "down time?" Jesus plays for keeps and so does evil. There is no middle ground. This is the commitment that the gospel calls for and it can be costly. The value of all of these things that were burned was probably between 6-7 million dollars. Some of these believers may have been tempted to sell what they had in order to recoup some of the cost, but by burning it, they not only got rid of it for themselves, but made certain that no one else would have access to them either.

IV. The uncontainable power of the gospel. (20)

Once more, Luke summarizes the result. The gospel spreads. It has and it will. Christ has promised to build his church and is doing that right before our eyes.

A little over a month ago, Li Wenliang sent a message to his medical school classmates in Wuhan, China about a mysterious illness. The city's health authorities demanded that he (and seven others) sign a statement promising that he would stop spreading rumors. As many of you now know, even though officials said that the virus could not be transmitted between humans, it could and it did infecting tens of thousands of people, including Li who became infected after treating one of his patients. This week, he died

Panic, fear, seething anger at the cover-up and lies as gripped Wuhan and other regions in China, and many of you have been following this story, but there are two related angles of it, that I want you to consider and pray about. 1) In recent years, the gospel has been spreading in China in such a powerful way that government officials have been increasing pressure, persecution and in some cases outright hostility through closing some churches and imprisoning pastors. The house church movement has continued. Even under pressure, the gospel cannot be contained. As news of this virus has continued to spread and defy attempts at containment, I have wondered if we would possibly witness a Philippians jailer type of response to crisis. In other words, would those who have persecuted the believers now plead with them pray. But, the other angle is this: 2) We are witnessing history repeat itself. I have told you before how one of the ways that the early church grew so much was due to the fact that when a plague swept through a city, and all the

local officials and local temple priests ran for their lives, it was the Christians who stayed behind to care for and pray for the sick. Right now, as some of the same things are reportedly happening at the epicenter of this pandemic, Christians are caring for the sick, bringing food, sharing the gospel, praying and responding to this crisis like Christians should.

Jason is a friend of mine who pastors a church in Shanghai, I received an email from him this week in which he said: *"As we're processing the coronavirus news over here in China, we've talked with our congregations and met with pastors of other churches in our association to share news and discuss decision making. We certainly gone before the Lord in prayer and meditated upon His Word. And one other thing that we've done is think historically. How have Christians throughout the centuries responded to plagues and epidemics? How have they encouraged their churches? Did they stay or go? It's interesting how many times pastors will speak of the necessity for essential public servants to stay and not flee. And by "essential," they mean folks like doctors, nurses, government employees, and, wait for it... ministers of the gospel. When the State Department encouraged all "non-essential" Americans to leave China by commercial means, I'm sure they would include pastors and missionaries in that category. But, our brothers and sisters from centuries past are a good reminder that the ministry of the gospel is in fact essential"* There is more going on here than a virus and I do not pretend to know what all of that is, other than to realize that we are in a war that goes beyond disease and we need to see that.

I close with one story. A mother, who was not a believer, traveled from Wuhan to be with her son in another province for the new year celebration. She was infected with the coronavirus and upon arrival, began to decline. The son, who is a believer, informed his church who began to care for her. His pastor would call her and shared the gospel with her. Jesus had come to this earth to do for her what she could not do for herself. He died on the cross to pay for her sins and her only hope was to turn from trusting in anything and anyone else and trust Christ. Eventually, she did. The church gave her a little sound system so she could hear gospel music, and when she died several days later, the pastor did her funeral on-line from Psalm 80 and shared the story of the gospel and her late in life faith in Christ. This funeral message was posted on-line and has had over 80,000 views as people continue to share the message of the gospel with others who are suffering and dying so that in their dire condition, they might find Christ. Time will tell if the coronavirus can be contained and addressed. Time has already told us that you cannot contain the gospel.

Ephesians 6 - call to prayer