

## Acts 15: The Door of Opportunity

### I. Intro:

#### A. Paul's Journey to Ephesus:

After a year and a half of ministry in Corinth, Paul took Priscilla and Aquila and left in the spring of 52 AD. They sailed across the Aegean Sea to the West Coast of Turkey to the city of Ephesus. Ephesus was located in the Roman province of Asia. This confuses us because we think of Asia as the large continent.

Paul left Priscilla and Aquila there as an advance ministry team. He spoke in the synagogue with the Jews and was invited stay and tell them more. But Paul declined since he needed to go back to Antioch. He promised to return if he could and then he sailed for Judea, landing at Ceasarea, and eventually traveled back to Antioch to report to his home church, thus ending his 2<sup>nd</sup> Missionary Journey.

He probably stayed the winter in Antioch before setting out on his 3<sup>rd</sup> Missionary Journey in 53 AD. He traveled overland west through Turkey. He again visited the churches in Galatia and Phrygia that he had planted on his first missionary journey with Barnabus. He taught and strengthened the faith of those disciples. But he was always heading west, toward Ephesus and the Province of Asia.

- Remember, Paul had been *"kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia, on his previous journey."* Acts 16:6
- It was the place he had left Priscilla and Aquila.
- It was the place where he had a standing invitation from the synagogue to return and teach about Jesus.
- It was also a major center of occult activity with it temple to Artemis and the widespread practice of sorcery. The Temple to Artemis was one of the original "7 Wonders of the World" that included the Great Pyramids of Egypt and the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. It had been destroyed and rebuilt by Paul's time but the influence of this fertility cult was pervasive.

#### B. Touring Ephesus:

Ephesus was originally a port city on the coast with a large harbor, but the river silted in the harbor creating a marsh, so that today the city is 4 miles inland.

Paul must have prayed a lot about whether God wanted him to go there and preach at this

time. And if he did, how might things turn out. What lay ahead for Paul was almost 3 years of ministry in Ephesus that would impact the city and the entire province of Asia. Toward the end of those 3 years, he summarized his experience at Ephesus in a letter to the Church at Corinth.

*"But I will stay on at Ephesus until Pentecost, because a great door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many who oppose me."* I Cor.16:9

**Read Acts 18:24-28**

## **II. Cracking The Door Open: 18:24-28**

We see hints of how this "*great door for effective work*" opened for Paul here in Acts 18 & 19. Several years before, the Holy Spirit wouldn't even let Paul go there. It was a closed door. How did this place of darkness become a place of effective work despite the opposition? The most important answer is that the Holy Spirit was already at work in the Province of Asia and the city of Ephesus long before Paul ever got there. And he was working in unexpected ways.

### **A. Evangelism John the Baptist Style:**

Here we encounter for the first time Apollos. He was a highly educated man from Alexandria in Egypt. He was a Jew and was able to teach accurately about Jesus. But he did it simply on the basis of his knowledge of the Old Testament Scriptures and from the baptism and instruction of John the Baptist. This suggests that Apollos learned much from the ministry of John. Who was John the Baptiser? Matthew 3:3 says:

*This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah:*

*"A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord,*

John's ministry was preparation to make people ready for Jesus. How did he do that?

#### **1. A Baptism of Repentance: Matt. 3:1-12**

Here in Acts 19:4, Paul summarizes John ministry as "*a baptism of repentance*". Which raises the question: "*If you are a good law-keeping Jew, why is repentance necessary?*" The answer is because no one could keep the Law. John came preaching the need for everyone to repent. He brought people face to face with their need! **And repentance is always the first step in a relationship with God!**

People may have been confused about the purpose of the Law, but at least it was accepted as God's moral standard. John could use the O.T. Law to point people to their need of a Saviour! The perfection the Law demands made people realize they couldn't be good enough for God on their own. This is one crucial step in preparing people to seek a Saviour. Apollos was accurately teaching people they couldn't be good enough on their own to please God.

But John and Apollos were mostly dealing with people who had made it to first base in the path to God. We probably have to work with people still in the batters' box! The moral standard of our day is that there is no such thing as right or wrong as long as you don't hurt anyone. And if movies are the morality plays of our day, the wrongness of hurting someone mostly depends on whether they deserve it or not. *(which paradoxically implies an undefined moral standard as well)* Morality is mostly seen as a cultural artifact of a restrictive past and valid only as it aligns with the court of public opinion. There is no objective basis for right and wrong. And if there is a god at all, well; all ways to God are equally good as long as you are sincere, right? So unlike John the Baptist, any appeal to an objective standard of morality gains little traction in our culture. It appears like no one needs saving.

And yet, people today are revulsed by the evil around them. The murder of 19 grade 4 children and 2 teachers in their classroom this week appalls even cynics. The numerous unmarked graves of indigenous children around residential schools across this country is horrifying to all but the most hardened. The mass graves of civilians in Bucha, Ukraine challenges the minimization of good and evil and the denial of moral standards.

And in contrast to this philosophical denial of objective morality espoused around us; people carry huge amounts of inner guilt and shame over their own actions. The lying, cheating, stealing and hurting of others which we must own, if only to ourselves; is a subjective reminder that none of have lived up even to our own standards, much less God's. It too challenges the minimization of good and evil. And leaves people feeling a need to make things right or to do better.

So I think a starting point in bringing people face to face with their need is not to confronting them with an objective moral standard they deny by pointing out that what they are doing is sinful. It is by touching on their subjective experience of guilt or shame. Is guilt just a cultural artifact of a restrictive past? Or is it an internal response, a whisper of the divine; wired into us by our Creator that makes us aware of our need of Him and His forgiveness? And I think one way to touch that subjective experience is just to tell of our own experience of release from guilt and shame by Christ.

## **2. A Greater Someone:**

Another part of John's ministry was to point people to a mysterious Someone Greater.

*"I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry." Matt.3:11*

John was creating anticipation and hope that there was more to see and more to know

than what people had experienced with God so far. He was speaking of the One who was powerful enough to conquer death and whose worth is beyond human comparison or equal. Acts tells us that Apollos *“taught about Jesus accurately.”* (Acts 18:25) In so doing, he too was creating anticipation for Someone Greater. Someone beyond what they had so far known.

The Bible advises people to *“Taste and see that the Lord is good!”* Psalm 34:8 The Spirit is inviting people to be drawn by the aroma of what’s cooking in God’s kitchen. He beckons people to sneak in and steal a taste of what is being offered for dinner. Have you tasted that Someone Greater? What is great about Jesus to you? How have you experienced Him in your life that has helped you through difficulty or loss? How has His acceptance carried you when darkness or guilt felt overwhelming? Why don’t you tell others what God’s cookin’! And not because you’ve read the menu, but because you have tasted that the Lord is good! After all, God says; *“We are the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing.”* 2 Cor. 2:15 The reality of our relationship with Jesus is that aroma that can make people anticipate something good!

### **3. A Greater SomeThing: vs.12**

Finally John, said, *“I baptize you in water for repentance. But there is a greater baptism coming through the Messiah. He will baptize people with the Holy Spirit and with fire.”*

John the Baptist faced people with their need, and created anticipation for Someone Greater. But he also intrigued them about a SomeThing Greater. He spoke of a mysterious baptism with the Holy Spirit. He was hinting at an experience with God that would go beyond dry religious duty to be life changing and experiential.

Apollos came to the synagogue in Ephesus and taught people the things John taught. And he had a powerful impact on the Jews there. But, he could only take them so far. There were parts of the story he was missing and things that he didn’t fully grasp. However, like John the Baptist, God used Apollos to prepare the way for the Lord and for Paul. God used Apollos to crack open that door of opportunity for Paul that God had up until now not allowed Paul walk through!!

### **B. Discipleship Priscilla & Aquila Style: vs. 26**

Apollos could only take people so far, but now we see another thing God used to open that door, the ministry of Priscilla & Aquila. They were not the kind of people to get up front in the synagogue and teach. But they didn’t mind inviting Apollos to their home and *explaining the way of God more accurately.* It says a lot about Apollos that he could receive instruction from these quiet people in the congregation of the Synagogue. Priscilla and

Aquila strengthened and deepened what God was doing through Apollos. And having received instruction, they encouraged him to go over to Corinth where he was a great help to the believers there. Paul later described the complementary nature of his and Apollos' ministries.

*<sup>5</sup> What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. <sup>6</sup> I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. <sup>7</sup> So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. 1 Cor. 3:5-7*

God was at work in both Corinth and Ephesus, using his people to plant seed, and to water it in order to make it grow! In this way the door of opportunity was opened at Ephesus for Paul.

#### **Application:**

- 1) No matter how smart, or bold or powerful you are; you can only take people to the level to which you have come! I suspect that God wants to take us as a church and each of us individually deeper. He wants to increase our trust in Him, increase our love for Him and for one another. He wants to build our endurance and perseverance in trials and our faithfulness to pray. He wants to make us more effective witnesses to people around us. And the Holy Spirit is already at work here in Langley and in us. I wonder what He is going to do next.
- 2) We never know what God is using in people's lives to prepare them for the Gospel. He often uses difficulties and trials to humble people. He may have some other person who is witnessing and living out their faith as a sweet aroma. The Spirit's work is often mysterious. And neither the results nor the timing are fully up to us. But we are co-laborers with God in this adventure.

### **III. The Power of Teaching: Read 19:1-10**

#### **A. Responsiveness of Prepared Hearts: 1-7**

As Paul arrives in Ephesus he encounters more people similar to Apollos. They are called "disciples", but they had only received John's baptism of repentance. They had not received the Holy Spirit or even heard of the Holy Spirit. And they had not heard that John had pointed to Jesus as being the Messiah. But they had believed what they had heard so far and they were ripe fruit for the rest of the good news.

#### **Observations:**

1. Witness is always more effective where the seed has been previously sown.  
Coming to faith in Christ is a journey, not an event. If it looks like an event to us, it is

usually because the planting and watering process is much less visible than the harvesting. A word about God answering prayer, a loving action because of Jesus love for you are just as important as the moment the gospel is explained and someone puts their faith in Jesus.

2. Our categories for “disciples” may be too narrow. In the age of modernism that those of us 50 plus grew up in, we defined and categorized everything. The key questions we tended to ask people to determine their relationship with God were; 1) Did you pray a prayer to receive Christ? 2) Are you “born again”? Yet neither of those questions fits these disciples Paul found at Ephesus. But they are called “disciples”.

We believe that salvation is by faith. And they had believed as much as they knew. They didn’t know about the Holy Spirit, but they did know they were not good enough on their own and by faith had been baptized in repentance for their sin. Was there more for them to experience in Christ? Absolutely! Were they already saved by the faith that they had? I think the answer is “Yes”. And I suspect there are others in the world who lack knowledge of Christ, or whose theology is quite messed up by our standards. Yet they have believed what God has revealed to them. Remember, Abraham was declared righteous by faith and his faith was in the promise that God would give him a son through Sarah. Don’t get me wrong! *“The gospel is the power of God for salvation.”* Most people need to be told the good news and put their faith in Christ in order to be saved. But I suspect, God’s categories for what constitutes saving faith maybe broader than ours.

#### **B. The Rejection of Hard Hearts: vs. 8-10**

In contrast to the responsiveness of some, we also see God use the rejection of others. After teaching and debating in the synagogue for 3 months, Paul has to move next door to the lecture hall of Tyrannus. But this results in something even more amazing. God even uses their rejection to accomplish His purposes.

*He took the disciples with him and had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. This went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord. Acts 19:10*

This is a summary verse that describes this door of opportunity that Paul said had opened to him. Luke doesn’t detail all the events that made this a reality. But he now picks 3 incidents to explain how it came about.

#### **IV. 3 Incidents that Opened the Door: Acts 19:11-20**

##### **A. Miracles without Human Help: vs. 11-12**

First, God did extraordinary miracles through Paul. Note that the emphasis is on what God did, not what Paul did. It was not Paul's faith or healing prayers. He was not even present. It was God vindicating the message Paul was preaching by healing people through fabrics that had just touched Paul. In a city full of sorcery, incantations, witchcraft, and occult practices; people often believed objects associated with these things could have magical powers.

We would do well to realize that while there certainly are charlatans who do a hocus pocus acts for people; occult practices such as fortune tellers, palm readers, horoscopes, séances, witchcraft and many religious practices may be dealing with real demonic powers. This stuff is not a game. It is not surprising that it was to the church at Ephesus that Paul later wrote:

*<sup>10</sup> Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.*  
Eph. 6:10-12

However, without incantation, ceremony, blessing or prayer, fabrics that had touched Paul brought freedom from the very demons the magicians sought to invoke or appease. And they brought healing to people without hope. It was all God. God was tilling the soil, preparing the ground, and getting people's attention. And I would bet that He is doing stuff in the lives of people here in Langley right now.

#### **B. Powerless Imitation Imposters: vs. 13-16**

Second, Jewish exorcists had either heard stories or see incidents of Paul confronting demons in people's lives. They saw that he did it by the authority of Jesus Christ. But they had not put their faith in Jesus and they were neither under his authority nor authorized to exercise his authority.

They thought this was just a better magic. They thought it was just a formula, and incantation they could recite that would give them power over demons. They thought the power was in the words. But the power and authority over demons are in a PERSON. And that person is Jesus Christ.

*I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority,*

*power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way. Eph. 1:18-23*

Sceva's sons did not understand this. The violent response of the demons to the 7 sons of Sceva had a shocking effect. The people who had believed in Jesus suddenly recognized that this wasn't just a better form of magic that could help them deal with the spirit world. Jesus is not just a better witch doctor. And Christianity wasn't a religious formula to make God do what you want. It was a relationship with the Creator and Lord of the Universe. They recognized that this was on a totally different scale than anything they had ever understood. And we ignore this at our peril.

**Application:** This is real stuff and we need to be in submission to the authority of Christ in our lives, especially if we want to live in freedom from the assault of the powers of darkness.

### **C. Powerful Transformation of God's People: vs. 17-20**

At this point, something really surprising happens. The incident with Sceva's sons not only impacted people outside the church, it dramatically impacted those who had believed. Many of the people who believed were still hanging onto old sins in their lives. In particular, many were still practicing sorcery as a follower of Jesus. Remember, these practices had been going on in their families for years. They had probably seen occult power demonstrated on a number of occasions. Trusting in Jesus was one thing, but renouncing such practices was likely to produce anger and conflict within their families. And as we see here, the financial value of magic books burned alone was staggering. But they publically came and confessed their sins and burned their magic books. They recognized that they had not understood fully the power of the One they had come to believe in. And their costly repentance was something that people around them took notice of. In a very Post-Modern way, their passion for Jesus and the integrity of their actions made people take notice. Verse 20 says;

*<sup>20</sup> In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power.*

**Application:** When the people of God renounce the things they are still hiding in the darkness; and make costly choices for the sake of Christ; they get free and people take notice. Our passion and integrity mixed with grace and love and it is powerful witness to our neighbors.



## V. Conclusion:

Paul described his time in Ephesus in this way:

*“But I will stay on at Ephesus until Pentecost, because a great door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many who oppose me.” 1 Cor.16:9*

Paul found a door of effective work open for him and significant opposition because the Holy Spirit was going before him, preparing the Way before Paul even got there. God used the teaching of the Word to open responsive hearts and miracles without human help to credential His messenger. He even used the imitation of religious imposters to make a distinction between mere magic and the authority of God. And He used the powerful transformation of God’s people so that a door opened in spite of much opposition. Thus:

*All the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord. vs.10  
And the word of God spread widely and grew in power. vs.20*

### Reflection Questions:

1. How has the does God’s acceptance of you help you cope with feeling of guilt and shame?
2. If you were to tell someone about how good God tastes, what experience would you talk about?
3. Without comparing himself to Apollos, Paul described the complementary nature of their different ministries. How do we resist the tendency to compare ourselves with others, or to compare God’s servants among us?
4. Jesus said that following Him requires deny ourselves. What has been one of the more costly choices following Christ has required of you? What led you to make that choice?