

GREAT LESSONS FROM THE THIRD MISSIONARY JOURNEY

Acts 18–20

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We've been traveling along in the Book of Acts. We're at Acts 18:23 tonight, the third missionary journey. It's part of the third major division of the Book of Acts. Acts 18:23 through chapter 20 constitute the third missionary journey of Paul; actually unlike his other journeys, it's primarily centered on the establishment of the church in one place: the city of Ephesus, a city that today is adjacent to the modern village of Izmir, Turkey. It's in westernmost Turkey, on the eastern edge of the Aegean Sea, across from the country of Greece, across the water. In biblical days, it was the Roman province of Asia. It was certainly what you might call a successful missionary journey in terms of what it allowed him to do, what doors the Holy Spirit opened up for him.

Ephesus will always have a special place in my own life. That was the first time I ever got into the biblical world. I had never been in a biblical location until the late seventies. I had the opportunity to go to Yugoslavia and teach for a month at the Biblical Theological Institute. One weekend, I took a mobilization placement service worker—MAPS—who was on a short-term assignment in Yugoslavia and talked him into flying with me to what is now Istanbul. We then took a plane to a modern city, which was the site of ancient Smyrna, with a population of a million people. We were met by one of our Assemblies of God representatives in the country of Turkey working there. He and his wife took me, the next day, to Ephesus, which has been archeologically worked on since about 1900 continuously. They have done a great deal of restoration. Ephesus, today, being a dead city.

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I went to the place and thought, as I stood in the amphitheater that day, I had the privilege that Paul would have given one of his limbs to have—to stand in that amphitheater. In biblical days, this beautiful city overlooked the harbor; now the sea is a mile out because, over the course of time, with the drainage problems, the swamp filled in and the sea no longer comes up to the edge of what was Ephesus. I thought, as I was in that city, about the tremendous impact that city has had upon all of our faith. It was from that city that 1 and 2 Corinthians were written. It was to that city that the letter of Ephesus was written. It was also to that city that the letters of 1 and 2 Timothy were addressed. That church had the greatest pastors, probably, in the history of the Christian church. It was pastored by Apollos, Paul and Timothy and John, the apostle. It certainly was a church that, for centuries, operated in that region of the world with tremendous dynamism and power. Yet today, in all the country of modern day Turkey, there are probably less than fifty born-again Christians out of a population of about forty-five million. Compare that with the tremendous vibrancy of the gospel during the period of Acts, which we read about. There are reasons which I want to close with tonight for why a church might die, as we see in the long range historical record of the church at Ephesus.

In dealing with this third missionary journey, it's sometimes tough to get a hold of a Scripture like this because it doesn't yield itself easily to a didactic or a teaching theme. We can't go to it and say, "Here are seven arguments against worry," or "Here are three steps to a more positive self-fulfillment," or "Here are four ways to overcome bitterness." That Scripture just sort of flows along like a river and we have to put our hand in and see what's in the river for that moment. Speaking of putting your hand in a river. It was the ancient philosopher Heraclitus, in the fifth century before Christ, one of the Greek philosophers, who lived at Ephesus (since Ephesus, before it was Roman, was a Hellenized city). He was known as the "Weeping

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Philosopher.” He was said to be that because, if you had lived at Ephesus and seen all the degradation that was in that town, you too would weep. But Heraclitus was famous for saying “All life is flux. You put your hand in the river, and pull it out and put it in again and it’s a different river that’s flowed on. All of life is in change and constant motion.” Ephesus was that kind of town. It was in change and in constant motion. It was a crossroads. A cosmopolitan town. One of the five largest cities of the Roman world, a city populated, by the time Paul reached it, with three hundred thousand people. Incredible marble buildings. Some of the ruins still stand. The great temple of Artemis was there. One of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Today, all that’s standing is one pillar, and when I was there, there was a stork’s nest on top. At least we can say the result of Christian missions in that area of the world ruined paganism and destroyed its temples.

What are some of the kinds of principles we can derive out of Paul’s Ephesian experience on the third missionary journey?

We’ll skip over some of the kinds of things we saw earlier, like “It’s always important to do follow-up.” Paul, indeed, revisits the churches he founded on the first missionary journey on his way to Ephesus. But I want to key in primarily on his Ephesian experience this evening and simply say that:

I. One of the principles that first emerges as we look at tonight’s text, Acts 18–20, is that sometimes we will actually be able to ascertain why God put a negative in our life, why He put a “no” or a delay or allowed a loss to come into our life.

Not always do we see those kinds of things. Habakkuk didn’t have the privilege of seeing that. He was simply told that the just must live by faith and he may not see the solution of the problem of loss and evil within his lifetime, but he must go on trusting God anyway. But Paul was able to

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see, in his Ephesians experience, why God, earlier in his life, had said no to him. Remember at the beginning of the second missionary journey Paul had wanted to go to Asia to communicate the Word, but the Holy Spirit had said no? Why did the Holy Spirit say no? Now it becomes obvious. He wanted him in Ephesus, the queen city of Asia, at a later time so that he could be equidistant from the churches he founded in the first missionary journey, which were to the east, and the churches which were founded on the second missionary journey, which were to the west. He would be dead center between the churches founded on both missionary journeys, which means that through correspondence and through courier, he could take on the task of strengthening and helping and guiding and maturing these churches. Had he operated simply in a westerly direction and done the churches of Galatia in the first missionary journey and done Ephesus second, and then gone west into Greece the third time, he would not have had the same ability to link in with the trade routes and the correspondence routes, to do the kind of necessary consolidation of the work which he was able to do. So God had him there at the right time for that reason.

Also, Ephesus was the toughest place to crack probably. Had Paul not had some of the earlier experience in his missionary work, it is doubtful he would have been able to have the significant impact that he had in that town. There is a biblical principle that I think is so natural and important to the development of our Christian life. That is, the principle, "To him who has, more will be given" (Luke 19:26). Paul, as missionary, had labored in good soil, but he had picked up a lot of expertise along the way and discovered a lot about God's guidance and establishing a church. By the time he gets to Ephesus, he is ready for it.

I say that again to remind us that sometimes God says no to us, not because He's angry with us, and not because we failed, but simply because we are not ready for an experience. We may be

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disappointed with God at the time, but if we'll hang on long enough, we'll have reason to thank God. You look back and say, "Thank the Lord that You never gave me what I wanted at the time. It's so great how You spared me." I think Paul probably felt that way by the time he was done with Ephesus; "Lord, thank You that five years ago, when I wanted to come here, You didn't let me. You knew exactly what You were doing."

II. Another principle that I think emerges out of the Ephesus experience is that, in the kingdom of God, there are really no little people.

We find, at Ephesus, before Paul gets there full-time, the mention of people like Aquila, Priscilla and Apollos. Aquila and Priscilla were originally from Rome. They migrated to Corinth. Now they've migrated further east, to Ephesus. They were tent-makers like Paul, by profession. They simply carried their faith with them wherever they went. They were not church planters, however. Although they were active witnesses in their faith and active teachers in the gospel, they appear to never have successfully planted a church. That's not everyone's mission in life. Even though they remain at Ephesus, the church doesn't get established.

But it is through their experience at Ephesus that they rescue someone for very productive service as a minister. That is, this person Apollos, who was from Alexandria. He was a Jew. We know from a study of the period that Jews who were rabbis from Alexandria were especially noted for their eloquence in Scripture and their ability to allegorize the Old Testament text and make it scintillating and interesting. Apollos appears to be one of those golden-tongue people who have a marvelous ability to get into God's Word. Yet he was off-base in his teaching. Aquila and Priscilla, listening to him in the synagogue, realized that Apollos, as dramatic and as homiletical as he is, and oratorical as he can get, still is not really centered in his doctrine. What do they do? They invite him to their home where they instruct him, quietly and privately,

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showing a grace and dignity and Christian character by not trying to embarrass him before his peers or before the people to whom he is ministering. But they take him aside. And to Aquila and Priscilla we owe a great deal, especially, in the early Christian church, for the conservation of a wonderful minister who helps greatly in the work of God at the center of Corinth.

Aquila and Priscilla are almost part of the nameless group of people in the New Testament that were mightily used of God. They don't get many headlines. They don't get five star-rating. But without them the church of Jesus Christ would not really do well at all. In fact, their relationship appears to be unique. Of the six times Aquila and Priscilla are mentioned in the text of Acts, four of the six times, Priscilla's name comes first, which was rather unusual in any accounting of a couple's names in the biblical period. Evidently, the reason for this is that Priscilla tended to be more in the lead in terms of her teaching ministry in the Word. Aquila seems to be the more recessive in his leadership abilities. He was able to recognize the unique gifts God had placed in his wife and let her come to the fore and exercise the unique talents which she had. There are no little people in God's kingdom. Everybody is important and is an important link in what God is doing in the world.

I recall hearing this story, back in the days of the pump organs, where there would be a little guy doing the bellows and creating enough air in the organ to make it go. There was this marvelous concert organist that had come into this auditorium for this particular occasion to give a concert. He really whaled away on the organ the first period of the concert and got a tremendous standing ovation. At intermission time, the guy who was working the bellows kind of said casually to the organist, "We're doing a great job tonight, aren't we?" He was down there in the bottom, working the bellows. The organist said to him, "Not we. I am doing a great job tonight." He was put off that this upstart of a guy working the bellows would say such a thing. Intermission was

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over and the second half of the performance started. The organist went to hit the pedals and the keys and nothing happened. He tried to hit them again and nothing happened. A third time, and nothing happened. The little guy had left his post and was standing where the organist could see him. He was dancing up and down and saying to the organist, "Say we! Say we!" We all need one another.

III. A third principle that flows off this third missionary journey is something we noted earlier, but the application of the principle changes somewhat.

Paul has always witnessed to the people who were most prepared and most ready. And here he does it again. Usually, his tactic in going into a new place was to go into a community and start with the synagogue. At Ephesus, there is a synagogue but that's not where he starts. When he gets to Ephesus, there is no residual work left over from Apollos, Aquila, and Priscilla. They're gone, and whatever group they had with them is also gone. What's left is a small group of people who were baptized into John's baptism, who'd not so much heard of the full ministry of Jesus and who had not been baptized in the name of Jesus, nor had they received the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

So Paul starts with them. Only when he's through with them does he turn to the synagogue. He's linking up with the people nearby. Paul realizes, as he goes into Ephesus, this tremendous center of cultic power, and the temple at Ephesus was one given over to the Greek goddess, Diana, whose Asian name was Artemis. The main statue of the temple which survives—the replica, not the original one—in a museum at Ephesus was believed to have been dropped out of the sky. It was, in fact, a carved statue of a goddess, signifying the cult of fertility, which was very popular with those kinds of mystery religions. The temple of Diana represented the kind of religion which taught communication with the gods through communication sexually. Therefore, it was

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staffed by many priestess prostitutes and the goddess. It was icons or preventatives of this goddess which were sold all over the world and had brought much trade into this city of Ephesus, and made it very prosperous.

In this place, Paul knows that he's going to confront tremendous supernatural powers. It's going to have to be a powerful church. He takes these twelve people, who have already been indoctrinated in a preparatory way for the coming of Christ, a cult gathered around the personality of John the Baptist, and teaches them more accurately concerning Jesus. They're baptized in water, and then they're baptized in the Holy Spirit, with the evidence of speaking in other tongues. Out of that small, dynamic group, then, the church at Ephesus grows powerfully. In this occasion, Paul asks these believers, "When you believed, did you receive the Spirit?" (Acts 19:2).

That brings us to the fifth and final occasion in the Book of Acts where reference to the baptism of the Holy Spirit is mentioned. The first being Acts 2, the Day of Pentecost. The second being Samaria, in Acts 8. The third being Paul himself, in Acts 9. The fourth being Cornelius, in Acts 10. And the fifth being here, in Ephesus, in Acts 19, where people are said to receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Out of those five situations of people described as receiving the baptism of the Holy Spirit, three of those times they're explicitly described as speaking in other tongues. Two of the times—in Samaria, Acts 8, and with Paul, Acts 9—there is no reference to tongues. I think, however, it may be inferred from the fact that, at Samaria, the magician Simon Magus saw a conferral of a gift that he wanted to buy, a power that was given from the laying on of Peter and John's hand. It did not come through Philip's ministry. It was something concrete. It would seem like, since this was the first time after the Day of Pentecost that that gift of the Spirit is explicitly described as occurring, that it would have been in the same phenomenon as the day of

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Pentecost. Paul himself is described as receiving the Spirit, although there is no mention of the fact that, at the time, he spoke in tongues. However, it is interesting that when he gets to Ephesus, twenty-five years down the road, and he comes to that city, what happens through the laying on of his hands is an experience marked by speaking with other tongues. It is doubtful that Paul would have led other people into an experience he himself had not had. It is also doubtful that he who classed himself on the same category as belonging, in the same degree, with the other apostles, would have come behind them in any gift.

I had to deal many times with this question when I was in seminary, of the argument—from silence—that Pentecostals make. Here we have, in the Book of Acts, occasions where the baptism of the Holy Spirit is mentioned and, three out of the five times, speaking in tongues is part of the experience. The two criticisms are that we only have five occasions where the baptism of the Holy Spirit is mentioned, also, if that were an important doctrine, it would be mentioned more times. The response and the rebuttal to that is simply: not always is a necessary spiritual experience mentioned as part of what is happening in the missionary journeys. I cite, for example, the whole first missionary journey (Acts 13–14), where hundreds, maybe thousands, of people came to faith in Christ, not one time is a water baptism mentioned. Surely no one would argue that because water baptism is not mentioned on the first missionary journey, it was not occurring. So, simply because an event is not mentioned repetitively and redundantly does not take away from its significance or its validity. Secondly, it is sometimes mentioned, since tongues occurred only three out of five times, therefore, it must have been optional. I would simply note that every time tongues occurred, every one that was involved spoke. It wasn't that some spoke in tongues and some prophesied. But at Pentecost, the hundred and twenty all spoke in other tongues. At Cornelius' house, they all spoke in tongues. In Ephesus, all twelve spoke in

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tongues. So when the event occurred, it was not just one or two people in the group. It was the whole group that was speaking. And, furthermore, the ratio of three to five is 60 percent in terms of mention. I'm saying that the other two times it can be inferred.

If you look at conversions in the Book of Acts, you'll find that if you go through and count all the individual conversions, family conversions and group conversions, there are three categories of conversions in the Book of Acts. The Ethiopian eunuch is an example of an individual conversion. Cornelius is an example of a family conversion. The Day of Pentecost is an example of a group conversion (three thousand in one day). If you count all the specific instances of conversions, you will come up, if my counting is accurate, with thirty-one specific occasions in which conversion is noted in the Book of Acts—personal, family or group conversion. Out of those thirty-one occasions, only eight of them make reference to water baptism. That is a ratio of about 25 percent, just slightly more. Certainly, no one in their right mind would say that, because Paul only notes water baptism as occurring specifically eight out of the thirty-one times, then, therefore, the other two times, water baptism did not occur. That argument simply would not hold validity. Baptism was essential.

I think the same rationale could be used in regard to Spirit baptism. That tongues is part of the experience, like when you get baptized in water, you expect to get wet—it's part of the experience.

God wants to open our heart to deeper dimensions of the Spirit's work in our life, so that He makes us open that mystical side of life and step out in faith in areas which are beyond our rationale and our ability to control. That is kind of the gateway, the doorway to a new spiritual release and empowerment in the church at Ephesus, and certainly for the Early Church, throughout its planting in the Book of Acts. The church can simply never do its work in a

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powerless kind of way. Sitting down with committees and figuring out strategies and agendas and all that kind of thing. It simply will not go forward in that kind of fashion. The church of Jesus Christ, if it's to be born, must be born powerfully. It must be born in spiritual revival. It must be born in spiritual experience. The matter must live in our heart. Not simply on paper or in somebody's idea of progress. The Early Church was planted among people who were most prepared to receive.

IV. A fourth principle I want to look at in the third missionary journey is that God's work is really not established without a lot of hard work from a human vantage point.

It takes just a lot of sweat and toil and tears and elbow grease to see God's work advance. The Lord has designed for His work not to advance when we simply sit around and hope that it will happen. He's appointed us to be workers in the vineyard. If ever a person worked, it was Paul at Ephesus. He describes, in his farewell to the elders of the Ephesian church (Acts 20), that he worked among them to provide for his own needs. We know that his trade was tent-making so, somewhere along the course of the day, he found time to fully support himself by his trade while he was at Ephesus. Then we also have reference, in the Book of Acts, to the fact that Paul, after he finished a three-month period of teaching in the synagogue, moved into the Hall of Tyrannus, and there carried on a disputation. That is, a Socratic method of educational dialogue and training which continued for two years, until all Asia heard the Word. The Hall of Tyrannus was a public building at Ephesus, and Paul probably used it on a lease-time arrangement. Some of the texts of the Bible, not the majority Greek texts but some of the minority Greek texts, give the time of day that the school was in operation. It translates into our time of day as eleven in the morning till four in the afternoon. We know enough about Ephesus to know that that was traditionally siesta time in Ephesus. Ephesus operated on two shifts—an early morning to eleven

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o'clock shift, where everybody worked hard. Then during lunch and the niceties of the afternoon, people got sleepy and went home. They came back to work at four o'clock and worked till eight or nine o'clock. If indeed the minority texts are right that Paul used the hall as a teaching place for an Ephesian Bible School, then it means he worked in the morning, like everybody else, till about eleven o'clock. Then he went off and taught for five hours.

When he got done with building that Bible School, all of Asia heard the Word. Why is it able to say that? Because Ephesus was at the hub of all of Asia. People could come into that Bible School, from the other cities, or go out from Ephesus as missionaries to the other towns around there and carry the gospel. Then come back and learn some more, then go out and carry some more. Paul worked very much as a teacher, giving instruction at Ephesus.

I might add, in passing, that unless that kind of thing is continually going on in the body of Christ, unless we're preparing the next generation of leadership, the church of Jesus Christ is not going to be established and it's going to be in deep trouble. In our fellowship, we have a great emphasis on foreign missions. But we have to realize that there is a mission, before foreign missions, that can be effective. That is, there must be a commitment on the part of all of us in the body of Christ to be committed to Christian education, whether it's in the local church or in a college. If we lose that frontline effort of evangelism, where we train the next generation of pastoral and lay leaders, we will never see the expansion of the church. I'd hope that one of the things that we have stood for, as a church, is to say, by our commitment to Southern California College and to Christian young people going on to school, that we see this, not as something other than missions, but we see it as an integral part of the missionary thrust of the church. It's frontline evangelism to prepare the next generation of leadership. Paul knew this at Ephesus.

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He worked hard, working with his hands in the morning, teaching till four o'clock. Then he says, in Acts 20, in his farewell address to the Ephesian elders, that he also taught from house to house. So that means he had a moving Bible Study. Different homes through the different nights of the week. So he's got something to do, also, with his evenings, lest he get bored.

Then, in 2 Corinthians 11:28, he says he has, in addition to all this work he carried upon himself, "the daily concern for the churches." That is, the churches he established on the first and second missionary journeys. We know, by his letters and by the interchange of messengers back and forth, that he kept in regular contact with these churches and was greatly concerned for them and prayed for them. And add to all that his statement that he prayed without ceasing. Which, by the way, does not mean the kind of prayer that is going on hour after hour after hour. The word "without ceasing" in the Greek language could also be used of a cough. A cough may not be going on, "Cough! Cough! Cough!" But a cough may interrupt the routine of your day. It can come quite unpredictably. What Paul is saying with his prayer life is that his prayer life is not just some five-minute period somewhere, but it is all the time, intruding into the everyday. As he's working at his tent, as he's teaching in the Bible School, as he's going from house to house. As he's dealing with the problems and the opportunities of the churches, his life is being invaded with a constant communion with God. He worked hard in that place. We must remember that God's work goes on with our involvement and our effort, and that's not to take away anything from God. But it means that, if we're to see the Lord's cause advance, we must likewise give ourselves to good, hard work. That may involve hours of volunteer service and, sometimes, without a great deal of public mention or reward.

Speaking of hard work reminds me of the story of the new preacher in a farming community who was asked out for Sunday dinner by one of the deacons who was a farmer, and who had a rather

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nice farm. After dinner, the layman was taking the preacher out to see all the crops—he would show him a particular field and the preacher would say, “Isn’t God good? This is so wonderful, what God’s allowed you to have.” They’d go to another part of the farm and see the animals, “Isn’t God good?” This went on and on. The deacon was getting more and more steamed about this, “Isn’t God good?” and never did he get a compliment for what he had done to make that farm what it was. So after about the fourth “Isn’t God good to give you all these things?” the deacon said, “Yes, God is very good. But you should have seen this place when God had it by himself.”

God, in his economy of operation, allows us to be involved.

V. That gives rise to another principle, a balancing principle. God’s work is never established by our working without Him. God must also be at work.

God is at work, and we’re at work. Paul could have worked his head off at Ephesus and it would have gone nowhere. But God was at work, confirming his Word with signs. At Ephesus, there were unique signs. I don’t know the answer to why these extraordinary miracles of such a nature, that appeared not to have ever occurred either before or after Paul’s ministry, happened at Ephesus. In fact, with Ephesus, we are really at the end of Paul’s supernatural ministry. When he falls into his prison experience, there is only one miracle when his third missionary journey is completed; we’re only told of one miracle the whole rest of Paul’s life. Actually two. One is for himself, when he picks up a snake, thinking it was a stick, and he doesn’t die. But the specific miracle which he did was on that island of Malta, praying for Publius’ father who was ill with a high fever, and he was healed. Other than that, miracles are seemingly over in his ministry. Strange thing. Right when he is at the height of his intellectual and experiential power, he is

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helpless. He's a prisoner. His ministry, when he gets to Rome, will be a ministry of the Word, but we never find him at Rome described as doing any miracles.

I wonder if the Lord didn't allow these kinds of unique things to happen for two reasons. One, because Ephesus was such a hard place to crack and there was so much occult activity that it needed a special demonstration from the one God who was in control. And secondly, maybe as a personal act of grace toward Paul, to confirm him in the lonely days that would lie ahead, so that he would never doubt the reality of God's power, by reminding him what happened through his hands at Ephesus. He does extraordinary things. For example, handkerchiefs from his body are placed upon the sick and they're healed. Why is this occurring? It's occurring because Paul's so busy he can't obey the admonition about elders laying hands upon the sick and anointing them with oil; how could he go anoint somebody and visit somebody when he's working in the morning, teaching in the afternoon and doing house Bible Studies in the evening? There's simply no time. The handkerchiefs are not the white kind of things which the televangelists sometimes say they're going to send you if you'll send five bucks. It's not that kind of a deal. For one thing, there's no money associated with them. But secondly, they appeared not to be handkerchiefs so much as parts of his apron, which he would have working as a tentmaker. It seemed to be that same word that can be used for apron can be used here, in this context. So people are coming and fetching items. Oral Roberts has a certain amount of truth when he says people need a point of contact. Often that is an initiation to faith. There wasn't anything magical about the handkerchiefs, except somehow they stirred up people to believe these things were happening with Paul.

Extraordinary miracles were happening to him. An example of one of the extraordinary miracles is an exorcism that occurs with the seven sons of a Jewish cultic priest named Sceva. They're

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going to cast this demon out of this person and the demons say (in the Greek language, it's very interesting), "Jesus, I really know. I'm really acquainted with Him. And Paul I know, not as well, but I know him, but who are you?" And the demon comes out and jumps on them and they run, fleeing naked into the night. It's a kind of story that shakes the whole town up. God is at work in supernatural ways through his ministry. Because this place was such a place of the occult. This miracle occurs and these members of the occult take a rough beating. And physically they did get a beating. The demon gave them such a beating they ran out of the house naked and bleeding. That's how bad it was. Both Jews and Greeks who had been living in Ephesus and who had been involved in the occult and who had become Christians, many of them now openly confessed their evil deeds. They brought their sorcery and piled it up and had a big bonfire. They burned fifty thousand drachmas worth of cultic material at Ephesus. It was a phenomenal event.

A drachma is a day's pay. Translated into today's wages, that was a five-million-dollar bonfire of cultic paraphernalia. If we gathered all the pornography that everybody in this town has and all the drugs and all the cultic stuff and burn five million dollars' worth out on the lawn, do you believe NBC, CBS and ABC would cover that nationwide? I think they would. That's a lot of money going up in smoke.

The next incident that occurs shows how severely Christianity, in two years' time, grew in that town. So much so that the idol-making traffic itself was affected and the economy of the town was beginning to go down. You know that there's a revival when the economy of a place—the liquor stores and the pornography stores and the drug dealers—is hit by the tremendous wave of population that's being saved. We need to pray for that kind of thing in our community and in this country. When those dealers cry out, "We're hurting because of the Christians!" you know you're making a dent in the culture.

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They gather at the amphitheater at Ephesus. The amphitheater was one of the largest and most beautiful amphitheatres in the entire ancient world. It's perfectly preserved. It sat twenty-five thousand people. You could hear a pin drop from the clarity of the acoustics. You could hear it from anywhere in that place. The union group that made the icons gathered together, and for two solid hours, shouted slogans—which is what people do when they get together in big groups. They have lost the ability to think individually so all they can do for two hours is chant until they're hoarse: "Great is Diana of the Ephesians! Great is Diana of the Ephesians!" Paul is in a home with some other Christians. He wants to get out and preach to that crowd. The text says, "The disciples would not let him" (Acts 19:30, NIV).

I've mused on that a little bit. I think they physically restrained him. They knew if he got out and went to the amphitheater, they'd tear him, limb from limb. Why did Paul want to go there?

Because Paul, in his whole life, had never preached to a crowd of twenty-five thousand people.

He always preached in synagogues or in public places, like Mars Hill or the marketplaces.

Probably his largest crowd was of a thousand people. Here's a chance to preach to twenty-five thousand pagans and to be heard. He couldn't miss that opportunity!

One of the most poignant moments of my own life was praying with our Assemblies of God personnel in Turkey on the stage of the amphitheater that one day that in our lifetimes we would see that amphitheater fill up with Christians converted from that land, today, who would sing to the glory of God. It's a dream. There's probably less than fifty Christians today in all of Turkey. We know that the people in the country today are not the same people culturally and ethnically. Those people were gone with the Muslim invasion of the Arab world from the seventh century on. There's a different racial stock there today, a different religious faith. May the Lord, in His sovereignty, grant to us a full amphitheater in Ephesus. I'd like to see that aired internationally

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on Christian satellite. The Christians have come back to Ephesus and are worshipping God and preaching and singing there again.

God was working in that place and God must work if we're to see His church grow.

The last thing I want to say about the third missionary journey is that Ephesus today is a reminder to all of us of what happens when we leave our first love. The death of the church at Ephesus and the death of the city of Ephesus were not accidental. It came through a gradual decline of spiritual faith. And with it, the decline of morality, decline of identity, of people knowing who they were. It didn't happen all at once. Gradually, over a period of centuries, the faith itself became corrupted at Ephesus. Jesus, in fact, in writing to that church at the end of the first century—some forty years after Paul established the church—tells this church that it was repelling false teachers and doing good deeds. And if you look at its annual report, probably from a human point of view, you'd find nothing to criticize. But Jesus already finds it at the signs of death when he says, "You have left your first love." And He tells that church to do three things. He tells them to remember their first love. Those glory days in which they gave up everything which was not helpful to their faith and put it on the bonfire. He told them, "Remember." He told them to repent of their callused attitude and wrongful hearts. And He told them to repeat the acts which they did at first. Maybe for a while they listened to Him but ultimately the church stopped listening. And its lamp stand was removed. Its influence is reflected in the lampstand figure.

Today, no one lives at Ephesus. But the little town that is a mile or two from Ephesus is inhabited by twenty thousand people. When I was there, I met the one Christian there. A single widower who, at a considerable cost to his personal faith, serves Christ. He's in a very menial occupation. He works in a café, serving tourists tea. He came to know the Lord by reading the

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Bible that somehow had fallen into his hands. In the course of reading it, he came to faith in Christ and ultimately, he found the body of Christ and he serves Christ in that place today.

Keep first love toward the Lord.

I don't want to close on that kind of down note. By the time Paul leaves the church, it's a strong and vibrant church. When he says goodbye to the elders of Ephesus, when they meet him at Miletus, there are a good many tears. There's also a wonderful acquittal that Paul gives of his life, where he talks about having defrauded no person and having accurately reported the Word of God to them. But he also tells them that they must be continually on the guard for false teachers, wolves who prey upon the flock of God. They will come, in a fiery attempt, to devour. He says to them, "You must resist these attempts. You must be on guard" (Acts 20:31).

We're back on dead center, where we began looking at the church in Jerusalem, back in the early days of this series, where we noted that the church in Jerusalem was a church which, first of all, gave itself to the apostles' doctrine. When we come full circle, twenty-five years have gone by and the third missionary journey is completed. We're still talking about sound doctrine and the need to preserve it in the church, because there will always be those coming who have a recent supernatural experience which they claim has given them some new revelation of God, which for a while will twitch people's ears, but will pass and leave devastation in its wake. So Paul warns the church, "Stay healthy. Be strong and keep centering on the main things and the plain things."

Closing Prayer

Our Lord, we have so much work ahead of us in our generation. There are so few of us to do it. There are so many people in this community and there are so few on-fire believers to do it. True, our churches on Sunday morning throughout this community are filled with people who have a really deep desire to at least have some relevance for their lives. But the committed core, the

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people who will really change and shake a community, that core, is much smaller. Lord, we pray that You would come with Your Spirit upon that core of people, like the people gathered here this evening who are really concerned for Your work to advance in our lifetime and in this generation. We simply ask for a new work of the Holy Spirit in us. Yesterday's experience is not sufficient to impel us to meet today and tomorrow's spiritual need. We must call upon You anew in our life. Lord, bring first love in our hearts. Bring new energy and power to our lives, that we may be effective witnesses for You. Help us—like the apostle Paul founded his Ephesians experience through his work and his giving—to restate again in our lives, indeed, as Christ has taught us, “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35). Help us to be on the lookout for every opportunity, to be of help and service and ministry. We pray this, Lord Jesus, in Your name. Amen.