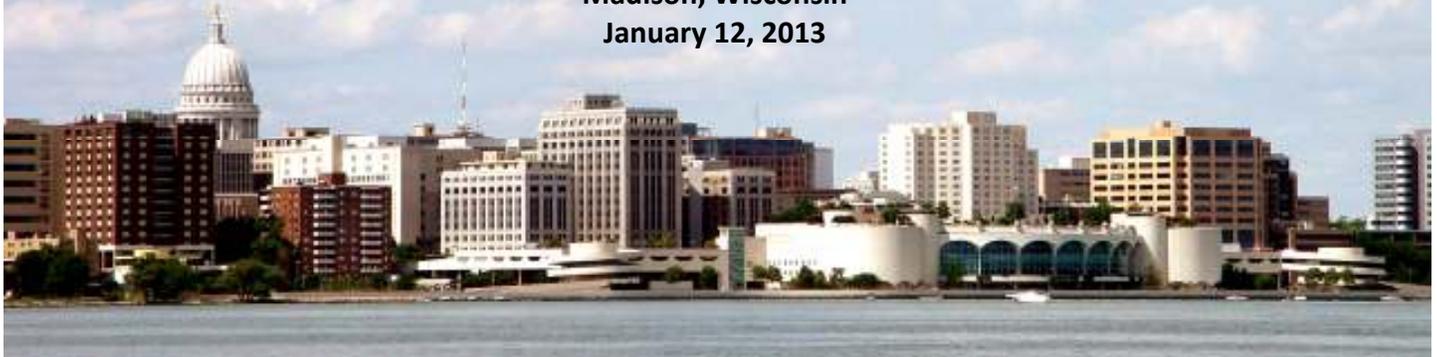


“Ephesus: A Case Study in Salvation”

ACTS 18:24-19:20; EPHESIANS 1-6

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If you were with us way back on December 15, then you might remember that we took some time to look a passage in Ephesians 2:1-10, a passage describing the change that took place in the lives of those who obeyed the gospel in the ancient city of Ephesus. And in that passage, we had a clear contrast: Before and after. Before, the people were dead in their sins, they were disobedient to God, they were enslaved to their own selfishness, and they were lost in that condition. But then, because of God’s great love, because God is rich in mercy, those who obeyed the gospel were changed. They were made alive, they were raised up with Christ, they were saved by grace through faith, and then they lived out the rest of their lives as God’s workmanship, created by God for a reason, to do good works. And of course, there was a good reason for us to study that passage: 1.) To appreciate the difference in our own lives so that we can continually praise God for his amazing grace, 2.) To understand the desperate condition of those around us who are still lost in sin – they might not look dead, but the Bible says they are, that they are dead in sin, and our job is to reach out with the gospel, 3.) To remind ourselves that we as Christians have been created by God for a reason. Like a tool created for a specific purpose, all of us as Christians also have a purpose, and our purpose is to go out and do good.

Right at the end of that lesson, I mentioned that I would like to use our next time together to go into a little more detail concerning what the people in Ephesus actually did as they made that transition from before to after. We know what God did. We know that God sent his Son as a perfect sacrifice. But what did the people in Ephesus actually do to accept God’s free offer of salvation. And the situation in Ephesus is rather unique, because we actually have quite a bit of information about the church in that city. We have details in Acts 18-19, we have a number of references in the book of Ephesians itself, a book that was written to the church in Ephesus, we have the books of 1-2 Timothy that were written to the young man who preached for the church in Ephesus, and then we also have a paragraph in the book of Revelation that was written directly to the church in Ephesus roughly 35 years after the book of Ephesians.

This morning, then, I would like for us to look at several steps in God’s plan of salvation, and I would like for us to look at these steps with reference to how these steps were taken by actual people in the city of Ephesus. A lot of times, we can read a series of steps in a book or on a website, but what we really need is an example. We need to see how those steps are applied. And that is what I would like to do with the plan of salvation: I want us to look at God’s plan, and specifically, I want us to focus on what following that plan actually looked like for the people in the city of Ephesus.

By way of introduction, I would point out that Ephesus was a port city on the far southwestern coast of the Roman province of Asia Minor, in the area that is now known as the nation of Turkey.

If we were to back out a little bit, it becomes pretty clear how important the port city of Ephesus was in the Roman Empire. The city was set at the mouth of a river – we think about cities like Chicago, and Boston, and New York – in a similar way, Ephesus was also very strategic. You can see Greece over there to the left, and then we have Italy and Rome further over to the west. So, when Rome needed to get to the province of Asia Minor, they would sail to Ephesus and then move inland from there.

The city was also famous because it was home to the temple of Artemis or Diana, the goddess of the forests and the hills, the goddess of the hunt, also the goddess of fertility. The Temple of Artemis at Ephesus was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. The temple was destroyed when the town was invaded by the Goths in the third century AD. The image on the wall up here is obviously an artist's rendition of what that temple might have looked like.

We do, though, have at least one ancient landmark in fairly good shape today, the theater, a facility with seating for around 25,000 people. This theater, by the way, is referred to in Acts 20. As a result of Paul's preaching, so many people started turning away from the worship of Artemis, the local idol-makers union got involved, and they started a riot. Thankfully, the town clerk got involved, and the apostle Paul just barely escaped with his life. All of this gives us just a little bit of background concerning the city itself.

But again, as we look at the situation in Ephesus, I want us to look at God's plan, and specifically, I want us to look at what following that plan looked like for the people in this particular city.

I. As we begin, I would take us back to one of the first and most obvious steps in God's plan, and that is: THE PEOPLE IN EPHEBUS HEARD THE WORD OF GOD AND BELIEVED WHAT THEY HEARD.

And for an example of this, we look to Acts 19:11-20 (p. 1737). Paul's first visit to Ephesus was actually on his Second Missionary Journey. On his way home from Philippi, Thessalonica, Athens, and Corinth, Paul just briefly stopped in Ephesus (Acts 18:18-21), he stopped at the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews, but then he very quickly left and returned home, but not until promising that he would return. And that is what he did. He returned and spent three years in Ephesus on his Third Missionary Journey in Acts 19. So, in Acts 19:8-20, we have a record of some of what happened on that Third Missionary Journey. If you will, please look with me at Acts 19:11-20,

And he [PAUL] entered the synagogue and continued speaking out boldly for three months, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God. But when some were becoming hardened and disobedient, speaking evil of the Way before the people, he withdrew from them and took away the disciples, reasoning daily in the school of Tyrannus. This took place for two years, so that all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks. God was performing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, so that handkerchiefs or aprons were even carried from his body to the sick, and the diseases left them and the evil spirits went out. But also some of the Jewish exorcists, who went from place to place, attempted to name over those who had the evil spirits the name of the Lord Jesus, saying, "I adjure you by Jesus whom Paul preaches." Seven sons of one Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, were doing this. And the evil spirit answered and said to them, "I recognize Jesus, and I know about Paul, but who are you?" And the man, in whom was the evil spirit, leaped on them and

subdued all of them and overpowered them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded. This became known to all, both Jews and Greeks, who lived in Ephesus; and fear fell upon them all and the name of the Lord Jesus was being magnified. Many also of those who had believed kept coming, confessing and disclosing their practices. And many of those who practiced magic brought their books together and began burning them in the sight of everyone; and they counted up the price of them and found it fifty thousand pieces of silver. So the word of the Lord was growing mightily and prevailing.

Just to summarize what happened here: Paul was teaching and preaching and performing some amazing miracles. We find that some Jewish exorcists tried to imitate what Paul was doing, but they got beat up by the demons in the process! So, notice what happened in verse 17, ***“This became known to all, both Jews and Greeks, who lived in Ephesus; and fear fell upon them all and the name of the Lord Jesus was being magnified.”*** So, those who heard Paul preaching also saw what Paul was doing, they learned about the Lord, and they came to fear the Lord based upon what Paul was doing and teaching. So we find that they heard the word of God and believed what they heard.

Now to me, it is interesting that roughly five to eight years later (after Paul had moved on, after Paul had been arrested and taken to Rome), Paul wrote a letter back to this congregation in Ephesus, and in that letter, he reminded those people of what they had done. And so, in Ephesians 1:13, Paul referred back to how they had listened to the message of truth (the gospel), and he referred to how they had ***“believed”*** it. So, looking back on it, Paul reminded these people: After listening to the message of truth, you believed what you heard. And we have a record of that back in Acts 19. The people saw the miracles, they heard Paul’s message, and these people believed what they heard.

Today also, hearing and believing God’s word is so important! When people come to our assemblies, they need to hear the word of God. They do not need the opinions of the preacher, but they need to hear the inspired word of God. Sometimes in the Bible, God’s word is pictured as a seed. When the word of God is planted in honest hearts, the seed has a way of sprouting and producing a crop, even 2,000 years after the seed (the word of God) was first spoken. As Christians, then, our job today is to get the word of God out there into this community. That is why we give away Bibles. That is why we mail out Bible correspondence courses. That is why you support me in the preaching of the gospel each week. That is why we give away clothing every August and why we give each recipient a printed message about the word of God. That is why we place an ad in the Yellow Pages. That is why we maintain a website that has roughly 60,000 hits every month. As a congregation, our focus is spreading the good news of Jesus Christ here in Madison and throughout south-central Wisconsin. Teaching and preaching the word of God is our mission. So, first of all, the people of Ephesus heard the word of God and believed what they had heard.

II. There is something else these people did, and that is: THEY REPENTED OF THEIR SINFUL BEHAVIOR.

Going back to that passage in Acts 19, did you notice what their belief caused them to do? If you still have a finger there in Acts 19, please notice again Acts 19:18-20,

Many also of those who had believed kept coming, confessing and disclosing their practices. And many of those who practiced magic brought their books together and began burning them in the sight of everyone; and they counted up the price of them and found it fifty thousand pieces of silver. So the word of the Lord was growing mightily and prevailing.

And so we find that their belief in the Lord caused them to change their behavior. Notice: In response to hearing the word of God and believing it, those who practiced magic brought their books together and began burning those books right there in the sight of everyone. Most of you probably remember the huge controversy several years ago when some minister threatened to burn a bunch of Korans at his church down in Florida. A lot of people came to his defense and said, "Well, you know, they burned a lot of books in the Bible – right there in Acts 19!" But I would point out a critical difference: In Acts 19, those who burned the books were the ones who were coming out of that lifestyle. In other words, Paul did not storm into town and call the local media and set up a huge book-burning. Instead, Paul preached the word of God, the people saw from God's word that what they were doing was wrong, and they decided to make a very public break with their past. And to me, that is amazing! According to Acts 19:18, those who believed **"...kept coming, confessing and disclosing their practices."** They acknowledged their sin and turned away from it.

In the next chapter of Acts, in Acts 20:20-21, Paul was passing through the area on his way home from that Missionary Journey, and when he met the elders from Ephesus for just a few moments on the beach at Miletus, Paul thought back about his three years preaching in Ephesus, and notice how he summarized his time there. In Acts 20:20-21, he spoke of how he served the Lord constantly, **"...how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house, solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ."** So we notice: Paul constantly spoke of **"repentance toward God."** In the same way, every Sunday morning here in Madison, we always (without fail) give an invitation to everyone here to "turn away from sin and back to God." That is what we are talking about here. When we hear the word of God, we are motivated to change, to turn. The word "repent" refers to having a change of heart, a change of mind, and that change of mind reflects itself in a change in the way we are living. If you are a pagan magician, it might cause you to burn your magic books right out here in front of our building. Of course, if you want to burn anything here in Madison (seriously), you would need a Underwriters Laboratory approved fire pit, you would need a copy of the instruction manual for the fire pit (and have the manual on hand while you are burning), you would need to have a charged water hose nearby, the fire would need to be 15 feet away from any structure and 15 feet away from the property line, and the smoke must not be a nuisance to your neighbors – otherwise, the fire department can come put the fire out and send you the bill (this is what the law says). But if you were practicing magic, your repentance might lead you to do that. The footnote in my Bible says that each piece of silver referred to in verse 19 would be equivalent to a day's wage in their economy. I know it's hard to make financial comparisons. But I looked it up a few weeks ago, and the average salary in Madison right now is around \$57,000 per year (not including benefits). That puts a **"days wage"** in Madison at \$156 per day. So, in today's economy, those books they burned might be worth (very roughly) \$7.8 million. That is a sacrifice! And notice: They didn't sell those books on Craigslist. Instead, they knew what they were doing was evil, so they completely turned away from it and by their public action they encouraged others to do the same.

For Paul's commentary on what repentance looks like, if we had time, we could go back to the book of Ephesians, to the last half of Ephesians 4 through the first half of Ephesians 5. Again, this book was written to the church in Ephesus maybe 5-8 years after Paul had left, and in that section of Ephesians, Paul goes into detail concerning what is really involved in repentance. If I could summarize: Living the Christian life causes us to have a complete change in the way we live. In fact, we are to imitate God in every possible way. That is what repentance meant for the Ephesians. What, then, does repentance look like today? A man who hears the word of God and realizes that he is living in an unscriptural marriage will remove himself from that relationship. A young woman involved in sexual sin with her boyfriend will make a change. A married man viewing pornography on the Internet will take steps to break away from that behavior. A woman who always seems to make cutting remarks to others on Facebook will make an effort to encourage instead. A husband in

the habit of making angry outbursts at home will rein in that behavior. A young person in school who is in the habit of cheating on assignments will start studying and will no longer lie about his or her knowledge by plagiarizing material from the Internet. We could go on and on, but the magicians in Ephesus have shown us that repentance will sometimes involve a large sacrifice, sometimes even requiring a change of career. So, the people in Ephesus were saved by the grace of God, but they accepted God's gift by believing the gospel message and by turning away from sin.

III. There is a third step in the plan here, as we find that the people of Ephesus were also BURIED WITH CHRIST IN BAPTISM – THEY WERE IMMersed IN WATER FOR THE FORGIVENESS OF THEIR SINS.

And for this, we actually back up to the last few verses in Acts 18. In Acts 18:24, we find that a certain man named Apollos was an *“eloquent”* preacher. He was *“mighty in the scriptures.”* And yet we also find that Apollos was mistaken when it came to baptism. Before Paul arrived in Ephesus, Apollos was preaching the baptism of John, but he was preaching it when it was no longer in effect. So, when they heard it, the husband and wife team of Priscilla and Aquila took him aside and (not to embarrass him) they privately *“explained to him the way of God more accurately.”* Apollos got his act together and moved on, but at the beginning of the very next chapter, Paul shows up in Ephesus (where Apollos had been preaching), and Paul discovers a problem. With that, we pick up with Acts 19:1-7,

It happened that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the upper country and came to Ephesus, and found some disciples. He said to them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” And they said to him, “No, we have not even heard whether there is a Holy Spirit.” And he said, “Into what then were you baptized?” And they said, “Into John’s baptism.” Paul said, “John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in Him who was coming after him, that is, in Jesus.” When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking with tongues and prophesying. There were in all about twelve men.

We don't have time to look into this in detail, but if I could summarize: Twelve men had been baptized incorrectly, but when they heard the truth, they did not hesitate to be baptized properly. In the same way, there are a lot of people today who were sprinkled with water as infants, or maybe were even immersed as adults but for the wrong reason (to show that they had ALREADY been saved, for example) – we learn from the example of the Ephesians that there is absolutely no dishonor in being baptized properly as soon as we discover the truth of God's word. When we are baptized properly (according to God's word), the Bible explains that we are added to the church, which is the body of Christ. Being buried with the Lord in baptism puts us *“in Christ,”* which is exactly where we need to be. As Paul would go on to write to the church in Ephesus several years later, there is *“one baptism”* (Ephesians 4:5), and the one baptism is how we are *“cleansed...by the washing of water with the word”* (Ephesians 5:26). There is so much we could consider here, but time will not allow, because I want us to move along and consider something else that is very important – a step in God's plan that is sometimes overlooked.

IV. When we obey the gospel, when our sins are forgiven, when we are added to the church, sometimes (over time) we tend to drift, we might even lose our enthusiasm – even to the point where we

fall away from God altogether. And that brings us to a final step this morning, and that is: WHEN WE FALL, WE LEARN FROM THE CHURCH IN EPHEBUS THAT WE ARE CALLED UPON TO ONCE AGAIN MAKE THINGS RIGHT WITH GOD.

If you will, please turn with me to Revelation 2 (p. 1915). The book of Revelation was most likely written in roughly 95 AD, which means that it was written roughly 35 years after the book of Ephesians. We know that a church can change a lot in 35 years, and not always for the better. That's what happened in Ephesus, so in the book of Revelation, the Lord sends that church a message. Notice Revelation 2:1-7,

To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands, says this:

'I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot tolerate evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false; and you have perseverance and have endured for My name's sake, and have not grown weary. But I have this against you, that you have left your first love. Therefore remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place — unless you repent. Yet this you do have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life which is in the Paradise of God.

So, we look back over this message, and just to summarize, they did some things right in Ephesus, but they had left their first love. They had lost their enthusiasm. And the Lord told them to remember and repent, to go back and to do those deeds they did at first. And that is the message for us this morning: When we slip, when we lose our fire, when we no longer practice hospitality as we once did, when our prayer life suffers, when we no longer read the word of God faithfully as we once did, the solution is to go back and to rekindle the fire we once had when we first obeyed the gospel.

Conclusion:

So, this morning we have looked at what the Ephesians actually did to obey the gospel. Back in December, we saw the before and after picture, and today we looked at the process: They heard the word of God and believed it, they turned away from sin, they were baptized, and many years later when they lost their passion for God, they were told to go back and do those things they had done at the beginning. This morning, we have an inspired example to follow. We cannot go wrong with this. If we do what they did, then we will be saved, just as they were. On the other hand, if you are already a Christian but have fallen into sin, then we would invite you to do what they were invited to do: Go back and rekindle the love for God you had at the beginning. If we can help in any way, we hope you will let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

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