

Sunday 23rd September 2018
The Book of Ephesians
The background.

The Text

The book of Acts in Chapters 18, 19, and the last section of 20, tells us the history of Paul's two visits to the city and region of Ephesus. He visited the city on his second and third missionary journeys. Acts 18 verses 19-21 tells us of his first visit. He arrived in Ephesus from Corinth with Priscilla and Aquila, where they seem to have gone off to do different things.

Acts tells us that, as was his custom, Paul first went to the Synagogue. This was the center of Jewish worship since the return from Exile. It had a structure of religious observation, officials and also acted in some ways as a cultural center preserving the rites and traditions, to various degrees, of Jewish life and religion. The text tells us that he stayed in Ephesus for three months reasoning with the Jews.

This is interesting, because in our age we have become more accustomed to a big name evangelist coming to town for three or four nights and months or years of preparation being given to the four day mission. To be in a city for three months reasoning with people, with a knowledge of the Old Testament, is something quite different. It takes a serious amount of time to reason from the Scriptures, and we should remember this when we wonder why change seems to happen so slowly. In our setting today, we often attempt to reduce Christianity into five minute sound bites. Even a course of Antibiotics usually takes a week or so to work. We are prepared to take a pill over several days to cure an infection, but object to taking a serious course of truth to cure us from spiritual death and the disease of a corrupt nature! Whoever gave us that idea? I wonder!

Paul was asked to stay, but he declined, but promised that he would return, and this he did.

Chapter 19 of Ephesians tells us of Paul's visit to Ephesus on his third missionary journey. This time he stayed for two and a half to three years, and this was his longest stay in any of the cities he visited. While the experts and the commentators busy themselves with all sorts of interesting questions and the fascinating pastime of dissecting and hair splitting, it is clear from reading the account of his second visit to Ephesus, and the Book of that name penned later, that this city and its surrounding area was the sight of Paul's greatest success and hardship. It is interesting how these two so often go together in Scripture!

While the Letter to the Ephesians was probably not written for them alone, but as a letter to be read in all the churches in Asia Minor, it does reflect the time and the condition of the city of Ephesus.

Acts chapter 20 gives us the account of Paul's encounter with the Ephesian elders when he meets them on his way to Jerusalem and ultimately to Rome and death. The passage in Acts 20 is warm, tender and also very strong.

While in Ephesus the second time, we learn that Paul first encountered twelve disciples who had received the baptism of John and had not heard of the Holy Spirit. If we look back to chapter 18, verses 24-26 we see that these disciples were the result of the work of Apollos, who was a believer in Christ, but still lacked certain knowledge.

Paul put the lack to right and the disciples were baptized in the name of Christ and received the gift of the Holy Spirit. They spoke in tongues and prophesied as on the day of Pentecost. Paul then went back to the synagogue where he (19.8) 'spoke boldly' and 'argued persuasively about the kingdom of God.' I can't go into the details of this now, but the Jewish idea of the kingdom was basically the restoration of Israel and the Temple, while the message of the Kingdom that Jesus brought was of salvation and the rule of God.

Paul and the synagogue attenders started off on different pages of different hymn books, and after three months reached an impasse and hostility arose against Paul's message. We don't often hear about strong reactions to the Gospel in this land, but they are increasing. This seems a shock to many as we have lived in a nation which has embraced Christianity, and as a nation, our ethical outlook has been sympathetic to Christian ethical values. However this is changing rapidly, and perhaps we should not be surprised if a more verbal and active hostility develops rapidly over the next while. We should not be surprised, nor should we be overwhelmed or put off. Read the early chapters of Acts and we read that when the Christians were told not to preach or teach about Christ by the authorities, they asked God for more boldness to do so. They got the boldness!

When Paul withdrew from the synagogue, he went to the school house of Tyrannus, with the disciples. We imagine that it was more than the twelve mentioned earlier, and given the whole account of Chapter 19 we have reason to think that there were converts from the synagogue months. It was this conversion of Jews which gave rise, in part, to the hostility which arose to Paul and his message of Christ, Cross, resurrection and Christ as Lord of all.

The text tells us that Paul held discussions in the school daily for two years. In those days, school started early, took a break in the heat of the day and then resumed as the day cooled. It is thought that Paul had use of the school room from possibly 11am to 4pm, so a lot was discussed because there is a lot to learn and understand!

Verse 26 of chapter 19 records the opinion of someone hostile to the message of Paul. He said that large numbers of people in Ephesus and the whole of Asia had been, 'convinced and led astray' by Paul. This was a great triumph, but it came at a cost.

The rest of the chapter tells us that there were Jews who were hostile, there were adherents of a pagan cult that were hostile, and even those in commerce who feared that their businesses would suffer as a result of people coming to faith in the One True God! Truly, Paul was not only fruitful, but he was also up against it, hostility, riots and all! On top of all this, while Paul was in Ephesus, he worked with his hands to provide for the needs of himself and others. He did not take money or support from the Ephesian believers and congregations of the newly planted church. He did this in Ephesus, but not in every place he visited. This was to show that he was not peddling a new teaching or a new cult. Ephesus was full of such people and groups and he would not have wished to appear just like the latest thing to come out of the woodwork.

The City of Ephesus

It was said that all roads led to Rome, well, in Asia Minor in Paul's day, all roads led to Ephesus. Ephesus was the administrative center for the Roman rule in Asia Minor. It was a city reckoned to have a population of 250,000 or more, so it was a huge urban center. It was a city of wealth. Following generations considered it rich pickings. Buildings were splendid, marble faced, and there were all mod cons. There was a hospital, public baths and public loo's with heated seats! Quite the place!

Ephesus had a specially constructed port, so there was wealth. Trading and all the vice associated with sailors and military folk far from home abounded there! However, that was not its only claim to fame. Ephesus was the seat of a prolific cult, that of Artemis.

At some stage in the past, a large black meteor had fallen on the location that became Ephesus. This was in itself a notable event, and the meteor was taken and carved into a large black statue, and idol, the god Artemis. The fact that the stone had come from 'the heavens' gave credence to the belief that this was a gift from the gods to Ephesus and hence gave the idol Artemis an importance in the eyes of her devotees. The Temple of Artemis was huge. It was reckoned to be about three times the size of Solomon's Temple at Jerusalem. It was later burned down by someone who wanted to immortalise his name, but I can't remember who he was, so much for that brain wave!

Artemis was a fertility goddess, and such goddesses tended to have a cult filled with immoral practices and ideas. It also gave rise to a thriving business of statue making. It is a common practice in idolatry that devotees bring offerings and go away with tat, expensive tat, statues and amulets, writings and all sorts of things that were meant to help secure the ends the worshippers desired. The Romans called Artemis Diana, so the cult was international.

The Cult of Artemis pervaded every aspect of society and daily life. It acted more like a multi-national organization as it acted as a bank and lender and had its fingers into commerce and society. The object of most idolatry, even today, falls into a few categories. To secure a good death, to ward off evil intents of gods and magic curses or spells, and to please the god so that it will either grant a good harvest or at least, not

send a bad one. These desires are not much different from the sorts of things we desire, though I hope the means we look to are very different!

A feature that went along with these religious cults in Ephesus was the interest in magic and power. The object of this magic, which was tied in closely to the cult of Artemis, was to use and manipulate the spirits to do you good and others misadventure, to make one succeed in love and business. If the correct names, words and formulas could be found, then the goal sought could be secured for certain! People then and now crave certainty, to be able to manipulate things for our own designs. No wonder it was a big money business! For every serious practitioner of these arts, magic, healing, and charms and so on, there were many other quack healers, bogus exorcists and peddlers of ideas, superstition, products and foolishness. Sounds just like today doesn't it?

However, not every practitioner was bogus. We read that magic books worth 50,000 days wages, that was a lot, were gathered and burned by practitioners who came to faith and gave up their magic rights. Some of these sorts of manuscripts and books have been found in Asia, and more, of a similar type, have been discovered in Egypt. There was sea trade between Ephesus and Egypt, so the Egyptian scripts which are more plentiful give clues as to type magic arts practiced in Ephesus. This was no Paul Daniels sleight of hand, this was serious stuff. There were spells and rights to deal with the malevolent forces of darkness and the underworld. There were also spells to make you attractive to someone you fancy! Nothing really changes. We are sold perfume and deodorants with the promise, or at least the hint, that these will make us irresistible to the opposite sex! In the rational West, we have grown accustomed to smirking at such things, but beware, as Christians we are to neither fear nor treat such things lightly.

We are also told of exorcists who tried to use the name of 'Jesus that Paul preached,' because they saw the remarkable effects of Paul's ministry, and the acts God performed around him. People in Asia Minor were fascinated and drawn to power wherever it could be found.

Paul's Mission to Ephesus

It is not easy to see what Ephesus was like almost 2000 years ago when Paul landed there. However, try and think what we would think if we were parachuted into Mecca or Koma in Nigerian, or into the Vatican City, into the financial square mile of London, or Soho, dropped into the crowds going up to Wembly Stadium for an international, or into the bustling streets of Deli with the commission of almost single handedly winning the whole area for Christ! This is what Paul did.

Ephesus had all the distractions of life that any city has. Crime, vice, drugs, trade, love of money, cults, philosophies, military and naval personal present, and yet, the Gospel caught fire in that city and spread throughout the whole region. It was not all Paul of course. It was the power of the Gospel as illuminated by the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit worked notable, extraordinary miracles through Paul and around Paul. That a

shadow of the man gave rise to a healing is a supernatural and sovereign act of God by the Holy Spirit. There is nowhere in Scripture that tells us that this is a 'normal thing,' or something we should try to do as a strategy, but when the Holy Spirit moves in such power, we should not be too surprised by the unexpected!

There is however something that we should think about from the account of Paul's time in Ephesus, and carry it over to think about this Parish of Foveran.

If we were asked to go on a mission, I don't think that I would chose a place like Ephesus. Too big, too much stuff that scares, is demonic and horrid. There were too many attractions and temptations, and all these people seemed so keen on the things they were into. This would be a hard city for me to work in. Surely there is somewhere else where people are more open to the Gospel, where they will like me and be interested in what I have to say. A place where a kind word and an invite to Soul Food Sunday would see them queuing outside the door to get in, a place and people who are ready to hear and believe the Gospel, a field ready for being harvested!

However, that has never been the way of things. Read the passage in Luke 10, verses 1-3. This passage is often viewed as saying that we should wait until an area becomes ripe before we evangelise it. Now, there is a sense in which this has merit, but that is not what this passage seeks to teach us.

What is a ripe harvest? We see it when we drive into Aberdeen. When the field turns golden, we know it is ripening. We are not surprised to see the combines in the fields at this time of the year. We would be surprised if a farmer sent a combine into the field when it was still green. Spiritually there is a difference. We do not see green and golden. There are things we like to see which we think are indicators of readiness for harvest. We think of it as a place where an interest is expressed or an easy hearing is received. However this is not how Jesus is using this picture of ripeness. I have said this before, but it bears repeating.

Are the unborn generations ripe for harvest? No, we can't get to them. (our books may get to them), but we cannot speak directly to them because they are not born yet. That is surely self-evident. The unborn are therefore not ripe for harvest.

What about the people who are in the grave yards? We can't speak to them, because they are beyond hearing. Again I think this is self-evident. Therefore, our mission is to those who can hear, who have are alive now and can hear, and as far as Jesus is concerned, all of these, no matter of what language or nation they are, are the harvest that is ripe. If this field is not harvested, the grain will fall and be lost by dying and passing from this world. The world therefore as Jesus views it is ripe for harvest.

Therefore, Jesus is telling us that because it is His harvest, because it is His world and because He is the Lord of the harvest, it is His right and prerogative to tell His workers when to harvest, regardless of their opinion regarding the state of the grain. We may not think a crop is ready to harvest, that they will not listen or believe, but if God says that

we are to go and harvest, then we should go. That is what Paul did, he went to Ephesus, a city that should have chewed him up and spat him out, but it didn't. He had a hard time, but he got a harvest cut!

Why Study the Book of Ephesians?

Paul gathered a harvest in a place which to us would seem an unlikely place to do so. There were so many things against him and the message, how could he possibly succeed? However he did because he was being obedient to God's command, faithful to the message, and he was assisted most powerfully by the work and workings of the Holy Spirit.

As a congregation, we are small, busy, harassed and at times disinterested and distracted by so many things. How would it be possible to reach out to, and see a harvest in Newburgh, never mind the rest of the parish, when we know we have so many 'members' who possibly don't remember they are on the role at all, and probably don't care either? It seems a task that is beyond us, and others don't want to know!

What of our condition? None of us are Paul's so what hope do we have? Paul didn't have a high opinion of himself, but he did have a high opinion of what God had called him to, and a high opinion of God's ability! If God had saved him, Paul reckoned that God could save anybody!

The tragic legacy that Liberalism and Higher Criticism has left in the West is a loss of confidence in the message of the Gospel, and a loss of confidence in the willingness and power of God to work through the message.

When we read the book of Ephesians we learn about message that Paul declared there, and Acts tells us the effect it had. Paul did not accommodate the message to be easily added in to the Ephesian ways of thinking, he proclaimed the Gospel which was contrary to everything that the Ephesians held in value, and God acted on it in power. This is what happened there and it is what has happened ever since in every place and age when believers have believed and obeyed.

The reason for looking at the book of Ephesians is so that we will live and declare the message of God, of Christ crucified and risen, of new birth and the transformation of our hearts and lives by the working of the Holy Spirit, and the hope of eternal life with God for all eternity. Before we can do that, we need to know what the message is and start living it, and this is what Ephesians will teach us.

The Gospel worked in the great city of Ephesus, the very manifestation of modernity and human wisdom in its day. The Gospel has worked in Communist China, with animism and idolatry in South America, Spiritism in Africa, and in Europe in the face of skepticism and all the other 'ism's' that have come and gone. The Gospel has always been the 'Power of God for salvation for all who believe', and it will always be the way.

