

**NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP STUDY IN THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES - PART TWENTY - CHAPTERS 19 AND 20**

Ephesus had once been a flourishing seaport but clearing forests and subsequent erosion silted up its harbour so that today it is 7 miles from the sea. Even by Paul's time it had declined as a centre of trade. Instead it had become a popular tourist attraction built around the temple of Artemis, a fertility goddess. This cult went back to at least 1000BC, to the finding of a meteorite which was supposedly an image of the goddess. The meteorite was kept in the temple and silver copies were sold at inflated prices to the tourists. Thus the whole economy and life of the city was built around false teaching about their idol.

Their god made money which is really no different from our modern way of making money our God. Just how was Paul to break into a society dominated by one false faith? And how are we?

The first step as we have seen was to plant two secret agents, Priscilla and Aquila, who would use their home as a base to win people to Christ. They started with Apollos who knew his Bible and the stories of Jesus, but had vital gaps in his knowledge and experience which they taught him to fill. The results were exciting. (18:24-28)

The second step was similar to the first. Paul met twelve men who had been disciples of John the Baptist but were even more deficient in their knowledge and experience. They had heard John promise the coming of the Christ and urge repentance, but they did not know about Jesus. They were Old Testament believers living after their time. When Paul filled the gaps in their knowledge by teaching the facts concerning Jesus it was now a simple matter to lead them to faith in Jesus so that He would fill the gap in their experience by sending the Holy Spirit into their lives. Two pictures were used by Paul to do this. First he baptised them in water, a picture of their desire to be buried with Christ and to share His risen life. (Rom.6:1-11) Secondly he laid hands on them symbolising their submission to the Lordship of Jesus. (19:1-7; I Pet.5:6)

'Speaking in tongues' has already been explained in 2:6,8,11 as being a miracle of God enabling believers to communicate the gospel to those of another language. 'Prophesying' describes God communicating His message through man. 'Speaking in tongues' therefore tells us how they spoke and 'prophesying' from Whom and about what they spoke.

Paul's third step when the Jews rejected his message was to move into a school hall with those who really wanted to learn and spend the next two years teaching them. He saw that the only effective way to deal with a city dominated by false teaching was with true teaching. The stronger the false teaching the more solidly the truth had to be taught. His strategy worked. His students caught on so well to the word and became so excited about what they discovered that soon the whole city and surrounding province, including towns like Colossae, Laodicea and Hierapolis were evangelised. (19:8-10) It was presumably during this time that Epaphras from Colossae returned from Bible School as a missionary to his own people. (Col.1:7; 4:12) It is instructive to note that such a comprehensive province-wide teaching programme could happen without printing, TV, microphones or air travel.

The process of disciples being taught so that the whole province was taught had a series of dramatic consequences. First, while God's word was changing lives, God's power was also evident in remarkable miracles. (19:11,12) Christians waste much time arguing whether God does miracles of healing today. The answer according to I Cor.12:11 is that it is God who decides. As at Ephesus our task is to concentrate on teaching the word and let God act according to His sovereignty in relation to healing or any other miracle.

Second, God's word changing lives brought imitators. The misfortune which befell the seven sons of Sceva was almost comical. As they fled naked it was not only they who were exposed but also the ineffectiveness of any so-called spiritual power that does not spring from Christ and His word. Just as we have not been told to be pre-occupied with healing so we are not to be taken up with diagnosing and treating demon possession. If the word is preached, the Holy Spirit will bring men and women to repentance. Christ's cross and incoming into our lives is the one sure answer to the Devil's work in any form. (19:13-17)

Third, the word of God which made sense and worked, made rubbish of any other message whether of Satan or of man, however magical its attraction might have seemed before. The best way to deal with rubbish is to burn it. Notice that Paul did not have to tell people to burn their magic books. When he taught the word of God clearly and faithfully it became the obvious course of action. Once more we are shown that trying to make people give things up is not our business. If we preach the word, God will tell people what He wants to change in us when He is ready. (19:18-20)

The fourth consequence of effective teaching was outright opposition and persecution, but before describing this Luke gave us a helpful glimpse into how Paul found and followed the will of God. He had an immediate plan to re-visit Macedonia and Achaia for which he sent his two helpers ahead to prepare. Erastus was the city treasurer of Corinth. (Rom.16:23) Humanly he was an important man but, in Christ, willing to be a servant. (II Tim.4:20) Paul had a medium term goal to visit Jerusalem for which he was beginning to plan. He had no idea yet that going to Jerusalem would lead to four years in prison. Rome was a distant goal about which he could do nothing except let God prepare his heart for an immense task. Our problem is that we want to plan 'Rome' in minute detail years ahead - and have nothing worthwhile to do today.

When trouble broke out it was over money thinly disguised as religion. As always opposition occurred when people felt their position threatened. Three things stand out which we have repeatedly seen in Acts. The accusations against them were half true excuses covering their real reason for anger. A few stirred up a mob who had little or no idea what they were rioting for. Any victims would do. On this occasion they found Gaius and Aristarchus, two of Paul's Bible school students.

Paul, never short of courage, was prepared to die for his friends but was restrained by others who saw that nothing useful would be achieved. The Jews, no doubt always nervous about their position in a city dedicated to another god, were trying to defend themselves, presumably by distancing themselves from Paul. All this proved unnecessary when the civil authorities restored order and dismissed the case, again proving the value of Paul's teaching in Rom.13:1-7.

From chapter 20 Paul began a journey which would lead him to Jerusalem, to prison and finally to Rome. He met a variety of groups along the way, for the last time on earth.

20:1-3 Q.1 What was the keynote of Paul's final ministry to the people of Macedonia and Achaia? How do you suppose he went about it? Why did Paul change his travel plans? How did he respond to criticism of those changes? (II Cor.1:15-23) What can we learn from his example?

20:4-6 Q.2 Find out all you can by using cross references or a concordance about the backgrounds and future ministries of Paul's travelling Bible school students. What would have been the particular value of this approach to training as compared with the school which stayed put? (19:9,10) What do these verses tell us about Luke's activities since chapter 16? Why did Paul take him away from a fruitful ministry? What does this section teach us about ministry to ministers?

20:7-12 Q.3 What glimpse do we get from this passage together with I Cor.16:2 about the customary practices which were developing among the early Christians? What are the values and dangers of church customs? Paul's last visit to Troas could have been remembered with sadness rather than joy. Why might God have chosen to do this particular miracle in this place and time?

20:13-21 Q.4 Why was Paul not willing to spend more time at Ephesus when there was obviously so much to do there? Should we not always be available to those who want us? What similarity is there between this story and Luke 9:51? What did Paul reveal to us here about his ministry at Ephesus? What was his involvement, his attitude to God and then his plan of teaching, and his message content? Why did he bother to tell them about these things?

20:22-25 Q.5 What did Paul now know about what would happen in Jerusalem? Why had God given him this glimpse into the future? (9:15,16) How does He do this for us? How was Paul able to handle such information without making it an excuse to cancel his trip to Jerusalem? (Phil.1:21-25; 3:8-10)

20:26,27 Q.6 What, so far as Paul was concerned, was 'the whole purpose of God'? (Eph.1:3-12; Col.1:25-27) How did he go about declaring all this to the Ephesians? How did he know he had completed the task? How do we know when we have completed our task?

20:28-38 Q.7 What special responsibility of an elder was Paul describing here? How will we recognise false teachers? What is the first thing an elder must do before he looks for the effect of false teaching on others? What practical examples has Paul given of how an elder is to fulfil his responsibility in relation to time, compassion, the Bible, money and reward? Why did Paul work to support himself and his helpers rather than living by faith? How had there come to be such a close bond between Paul and his friends in Ephesus? Can we expect to have people care about us that much?