The Power Above Every Power
Acts 19:8-41

We are looking at the Book of Acts, and seeing how and why Christianity had the impact it did. And today we're going to see the apostle Paul head out on his third missionary journey and arrive at the city of Ephesus. And what happens in Ephesus gives us a pretty good idea of why the gospel had the kind of impact it did.

Acts 19:8-41

So Paul arrives in Ephesus and Luke tells us, v8, that he went to the synagogue and 'spoke boldly reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God.' So he starts off by going to the churched. But when they become hostile he moves out and instead starts renting space in a local lecture hall, belonged to a man called Tyrannus, who was probably a philosopher. Now I know some of you young people think your teachers at school are bad, but this man's name 'Tyrannus' means *tyrant*. So he's got some reputation! 'Who have you got for philosophy this year?' 'Tyrannus – the tyrant' 'Ah! I'll pray for you.'

And in v9 Luke tells us that for two years Paul was 'reasoning daily' from Tyrannus' hall. So Paul gets out there in the world, in the place of ideas and interacts with them, challenges them, and takes the gospel to the prevailing world-view. He doesn't just go for people's hearts – though he did – he also goes for their heads, their mind, he reasons with them.

And the impact of this was remarkable. Not just the city but the whole region was affected by the Christian message: v10, 'this continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord.' So, it's as if Paul set himself up in a lecture hall at the EPFL, and not just Vaud, but the whole of Switzerland was affected.

But if that's what happened, what happens next explains *why* Christianity had the impact it did; because the gospel came into direct confrontation with the powers of darkness. So we're going to look at three things: Dark Powers, Impotent Powers and the Power above all Powers

Dark Powers
And here we're going to look at idols, deep idols and the power behind idols.

Now I saw a fascinating article in the UK edition of the Huffington Post this week. It said something like: 'Half of all Britons believe religion does more harm than good.' Now of course how you react to that depends on how you define religion, but what caught my eye was the word *believe*. Half of all Britons *believe* religion does more harm than good. Do you see the irony? That you *believe* religion does more harm than good is itself a belief, and a belief with religious dimensions. So they are criticising religious belief with religious belief. You see, we all believe something, and we are all basing our lives on beliefs.

But more than just *believe* things, we also *worship* things. Now here in Ephesus it was idols. In particular this goddess Artemis, who was a sex goddess, a goddess

of fertility and hunting. And the economy and culture of Ephesus was all built around this idol.

Now, today of course here in the West we don't worship stone or silver idols, but we still worship idols, and we still build altars to them in our hearts. Listen to what David Foster Wallace, the American writer, said in his 2005 commencement address at Kenyon College: 'In the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship.' And he goes on to talk of money and possession and appearance and power and intellect.

You see we're all worshipping something, aren't we. And an idol is anything we worship or sacrifice to that is not God, that takes the ultimate place in your life, the place that in the past only a god would have. It's the thing you must have to be complete, the thing you can't do without. It's the thing that gives your life meaning, that gives your life significance, that if you have its approval, and it smiles on you, you're ok, and if it doesn't your world falls apart. It's the thing that dominates your choices and decisions, the thing you're prepared to sacrifice everything else to get. It could be your career, or financial security, or marriage or family. It could be the approval of others – which can be a huge idol for pastors. It could be this longing for the love and affection of another. It could be any good thing that becomes a God thing.

And you know something is an idol, you know something has taken on godlike proportions in your heart when it's taken away from you. You see, when something that isn't an idol, but you still like or love or desire it, is taken from you, it's a blow and you mourn it. But if something that is an idol is taken from you, if your career is your idol and your career stalls or nose-dives, if the affirmation of others is your idol and you get criticised or ignored, if financial security is your idol and the money dries up, if your family is your idol and your kids go off the rails, then its not just a blow, your life falls apart, your world collapses. Or, you fight tooth and nail to keep it. You can't let this go, you won't let this go. Because your whole identity is wrapped up in it.

Which is just what Demetrius the silversmith does here in Ephesus. He realises that Paul has convinced large numbers of people, and they're turning to Jesus and away from idols and as a result worship of Artemis is suffering. Verse 27, 'There is a danger… that the temple of the great goddess Artemis may be counted as nothing, and that she may even be deposed from her magnificence." And there's a virtual riot. And if the crowd had got their hands on Paul, they would probably have torn him limb from limb, which is why some of the city leaders, the Asiarchs, v31, 'sent to him and were urging him not to venture into the theatre.' It's the power of idols. If it's threatened or taken away – you and everyone else knows it.

But the fascinating thing about this guy Demetrius is that he shows us that there are idols in our lives, and then there are *idols*. Deep idols. Idols under our idols. You see, to the crowd, this is all about the goddess Artemis and her worship. But

what is really driving it for Demetrius is deeper than that. Sure there was religious and civic pride – Ephesus' place in the world was built around Artmesis, and her temple was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. But deeper still for Demetrius was money. Verse 25, 'Men, you know that from this business we have our wealth.' That's what's driving it. His wealth is being threatened. On the surface it's Artemis, but underneath, it's money. Not only that, but many commentators reckon that the most likely explanation for why Demetrius is able to exercise the influence he does is because he's president of the guild of silversmiths. So it's not just his wealth that's threatened, but his position. If Artemis falls, so do the silversmiths, and so does he. So you see Demetrius' idol is not really this goddess of sex, that's just the surface idol. His deep idols are wealth and prestige.

Now let's bring this home to us. Why might someone sleep around? Is it just the idol of sex? Maybe. Or maybe it's the deeper idol of longing for someone to want you, to need you? Why do some of us pour our lives into our careers, sacrificing marriage or children or health at its altar? Is it just the idol of money – or is there a deeper longing to succeed, to prove yourself, to win the approval and the esteem of others?

And strangely, even out and out atheists who claim to worship nothing are really idolising something deep underneath, aren't they? You see Demetrius here has a vested interest in opposing Christianity. And the atheistic American philosopher Thomas Nagel says that everyone does. People who oppose the idea of God don't do so from a neutral position. Listen to what Nagel says: 'I speak from experience, being strongly subject to this fear myself: I want atheism to be true and am made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers. It isn't just that I don't believe in God and, naturally, hope that I'm right in my belief. It's that I *hope* there is no God! I don't *want* there to be a God; I don't *want* the universe to be like that.'

Why doesn't he want the universe to be like that? Why don't people want there to be a God? Because we want to be God. We want to decide for ourselves what's right and wrong. We don't want to have to face the implications that come with there being a god. It's the deep idol of self. My individual freedom to choose and decide. And so atheism is really no different from our friend Demetrius. It opposes Christianity because a deeper idol is being threatened.

But I called this point *dark powers* because of the power that lies behind the power of idols. You see, Ephesus wasn't just known for its idols, it was also known for its magic. And this event that Luke records of the seven sons of Sceva getting beaten up and driven out by the evil spirit results in fear coming on the population. Everyone hears about the power of the name of Jesus, and that, coupled with Paul's preaching, leads to this great bonfire of spell books: v19, 'And a number of those who had practised magic arts brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all. And they counted the value of them and found it came to fifty thousand pieces of silver.' Now if that sounds like fiction to you, Ephesus was famous for this sort of stuff. And in the ancient world, scrolls and parchments of magic were known as 'Ephesian writings.'

And later, when Paul writes in one of his letters about the battle Christians face against the principalities and powers, the spiritual forces of evil of this dark world, he's writing to these Christians here in Ephesus. In other words, Paul sees Ephesus as a place where the powers of darkness have exerted a stranglehold.

And you don't have to read or watch much in the news to be convinced that evil is more than just some psychological maladjustment. That there are such things as principalities and powers. Powers of evil and violence and injustice. And when we give ourselves to idols, whether that is possessions or power or porn, down the line we can find ourselves in the grip of a power greater than we could have feared, greater than we can free ourselves from. And we're trapped.

But for all the power of idols, the Bible tells us that ultimately they are powerless.

Impotent Powers

Listen to what Demetrius says, v26: 'This Paul has persuaded and turned away a great many people, saying that gods made with hands are not gods.' So Paul had clearly spent time intellectually taking idols apart. The Old Testament prophets had mocked idols, and Paul set about showing how empty and impotent they are.

But listen, how can you reconcile the controlling power idols can have in our hearts and lives, with what Paul might call their 'nothingness', their 'not god-ness'? Because, for all their promise that if you give yourself to them, if you sacrifice to them, they'll fulfil you, and satisfy you, and make you, and complete you, they will always let you down. They will always sell you short.

Now, I don't know if you saw it in the press this week, there's a new study in the Lancet, one of the leading medical journals, that shows that in western countries personal happiness falls in the middle years of life, when people hit their 40s and 50s. And one of the reasons that the authors draw out is that this is when people are working hardest to earn most.

But ask yourself, why are they working so hard in the first place? Isn't it often because we think that we'll be happier if we have just a little bit more, or get that promotion, or take on that new role, but what the authors found is that it slowly strangles our happiness. Because idols will never give you what you're really looking for.

You see, one of the fascinating things about this near riot in Ephesus is that Paul doesn't get a chance to speak. Instead the closing speech, comes from the city clerk – the chief executive of the city. He tells the crowd that instead of instigating a riot they should use the proper legal means. But then listen to what he says, v40, 'For we really are in danger of being charged with rioting today, since there is no cause that we can give to justify this commotion.' And what's behind his concern is that at this time the Roman authorities were steadily eroding the power of cities like Ephesus to govern their own affairs. And other cities had already had their right to call large-scale democratic gatherings – the regular assemblies the Clerk talks about here –taken away.

So what the Clerk is saying is, 'look, you're worried that Paul's preaching is going to rob Ephesus of its status – but it's your behaviour, this near riot, that is the real threat.' They think it's Paul who's causing the trouble, but really it's them. They don't want Ephesus to lose her place of honour, but it's they who are putting that very thing at risk. Why? Because it's not just that idols are empty and can't give you what you are really looking for, ultimately idols will destroy you. An idol promises you intimacy – and it kills your marriage. It promises you power, but it controls you. It promises you freedom but it enslaves you. It promise you peace – but it torments you.

Listen again to David Foster Wallace at that commencement address: he says that there's a good reason why you should worship God and nothing else. And that is that 'pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things — if they are where you tap real meaning in life — then you will never have enough. Never feel you have enough… Worship your own body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly, and when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally plant you…. Worship power — you will feel weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to keep the fear at bay. Worship your intellect, being seen as smart — you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out.'

Idols are empty – they can never give you what you're really looking for, worse still, they will eat you alive.

So where can you and I find the power to live free of these dark powers?

The Power Over Every Power

Sandwiched between the account of the evil spirit overpowering the seven sons of Sceva, and Demetrius' near riot over Artemis, Luke inserts verse 20 – 'So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily.' So that's what's got the real power here: it's the gospel – the word of the Lord – the message of what God has done for us in Christ – that's what's got the power to rescue people from darkness, and draw them away from idols. And the gospel has that power because it has the power to change our hearts – to transform us.

You see, look at these seven sons of Sceva. They try and cast out the evil spirit by invoking the name of Jesus. But the evil spirit replies, v15, "Jesus I know, and Paul I recognise, but who are you?" In other words, you can't use the name of Jesus like a spell, like the Ephesians would do, you can't just add him onto your life as an optional extra, you have to be in relationship with him. You have to be his. And when you are his, the hold these dark powers can have on you is broken, which is exactly what happens here in Ephesus: v18, 'Many of those who were now believers came, confessing and divulging their practices'. Now you might hear that and think, 'so what?' Well here's what: the thing about these magic spells and incantations is that their power was thought to be bound up in their secrecy, and no one else knew the secret; and the moment you bring it out into the light, its power was gone. So when these new Christians start confessing and

divulging this stuff, they are saying – 'this no longer has a hold on me'. They've been won by a greater power. The power over every power.

And the gospel has this power to change our hearts. I mean just look at these guys as they burn all these spell books, costing millions of francs in today's money. How can they do that? Because in the gospel they realise that Jesus is worth far more than money. And when it sinks in the price he paid to win you and save you, that at the cross, Christ faced the ultimate maelstrom of evil, that darkness enveloped him, but he did it for you, to break the hold of darkness on you, then it melts your heart, and no cost is too great for him. Why would you hold on to stuff, or stay in the darkness, when his light dawns in your heart?

And when you understand just how much Christ loves you, you'll love your idols less, because you know where your real significance and your real value lies. It's not in your job, or your income, or your success or your romantic relationships, it's not in what others think of you. It's in God and what he thinks of you.

And it's the gospel that has the power to change, not just our hearts but society as well, by changing our hearts. You see the gospel undermines all the reasons why you and I don't want to share the good news of Jesus or are lousy at doing it. We're afraid people might reject us. But as RC Sproul said, 'why worry about what the peasants think when you have the regard of the King?' Why worry about what people think when Christ loves you enough to die for you?

We can put people's backs up in our evangelism because we come across as proud and holier than thou. But not when the gospel humbles you and you realise that you are more sinful than you could ever imagine, so you know you're not better than anyone else, so the gospel kills our pride. But it also tells us we are more loved than we could ever hope, and so are those we go to.

We don't share the gospel because we think our friend won't respond. But the gospel tells us none of us are more likely to respond than anyone else and yet God has saved us by its power, so no-one is outside its saving power.

And so when we get the gospel – all that God has done for us in Jesus, it can't help but make us outward looking. And it's because of that kind of transforming work in our hearts that Luke can say 'the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily.'

And the society and the economy of Ephesus was transformed because the hearts of Christians were transformed. And in a few generations so was the entire Roman world. May God renew his works in our day, as our hearts are renewed by his gospel.