

Harry, Hogwarts, Imagination and the Unseen Spiritual World

Acts 19:11 – 20

Fairview Evangelical Presbyterian Church

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The ancient city of Ephesus was one of the five largest cities in the Roman Empire. It was a great, magnificent city. You can gain a sense of its grandeur visiting it today. In the end, Ephesus was abandoned, not destroyed. Why? The ancient ruins today are located five miles from the sea. The harbor kept silting over. The city fathers gave up trying to keep the harbor dredged. Perhaps for this reason, Ephesus has been one of the most archaeologically reconstructed cities of the ancient world. It is impressive to visit. You will find reconstructed there the ancient library, theater, temple, ancient homes, palaces, public restrooms and the broad shopping district, the agora. Ephesus was a center for trade – as we will see in next week's study --, the production and sale of idols, talismans, charms and jewelry. The city boasted an impressive temple built in honor of the Greek god Diana. And, it was an intellectual center.

Where the gospel of Christ goes, it promotes change. Last week, in the stories of Apollos and of the twelve unnamed men, we saw how these men, whose understanding of the knowledge and message of Christ was sincere, but incomplete: were brought to a fully, truer, more complete grasp of the truth. This week, the challenge is greater. The contrast we see is between the unseen spiritual world of false religion and the message of Christ.

First, we note that God works through gifted men and women.

God works through gifted men and women

¹¹ And God was doing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul,

The Apostle Paul was a remarkable man: insightful, gifted, full of energy, driven by a vision of proclaiming Christ in the intellectual centers of the ancient Roman world. And, God blessed Paul's efforts in a special way: he did extraordinary miracles in the name of Christ. Luke tells us the one doing the miracles was not Paul, but God, through him. This is important, for in a few verses we will find others attempting to do miracles, but using a different power.

For this first point, we simply note that God often sends remarkably gifted men and women to accomplish his purposes in our world. This is the year 2017. This year is the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. The story of the Reformation includes the stories of remarkable men such as Calvin, Melancthon, Turretin, Bucer, Zwingli, and, of course, Martin Luther. Luther not only sparked the Reformation with his 95 Theses; he also revolutionized hymnody; translated the Bible into the German vernacular; and much more. God uses remarkable people to accomplish his purposes. And that observation leads to the next: God also works through odd and quirky means.

God also works through odd and quirky means

¹² so that even handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched his skin were carried away to the sick, and their diseases left them and the evil spirits came out of them.

I know a young couple, I officiated at their wedding, who are expecting their first child come March. This past week they posted pictures of the nursery they have prepared for their new arrival. It has a distinctive Harry Potter look to it: the “Sorting Hat” sits on a bookshelf; as does Harry’s owl, Sedgwick; and – my favorite – a wall hanging sign declaring “Free Dobby,” with a pair of small white socks hanging on a clothes line under it. ☺ In the Harry Potter stories, Dobby is an elf who, when he first appears, is given to great mischief and is exceedingly annoying. Dobby is a house elf, meaning that he is enslaved to Lucius Malfoy, a key antagonist in the Harry Potter stories. Over the course of the unfolding stories, Dobby does obtain his freedom, and becomes an important character in Harry’s ultimate success. Nonetheless, Dobby is always a quirky and odd character. Accused by Bellatrix Lestrang of trying to kill her, Dobby replies, “No. Just to hurt, and seriously maim.” ☺ He is quirky and lovable and one of the pleasures of the Harry Potters series.

I tell you about Dobby, because I think knowing Dobby will help us understand verse 12. Verse 12 drives many Bible commentators, especially the liberal ones, crazy. The suggestion is that Paul’s reputation as a healer was such that people would sneak off with his handkerchiefs, sweat bands and work apron, bringing these things to the sick and they would be given healing. Many find the idea ludicrous, embarrassing. Some modern tele-evangelists will promise to send to their listeners similar healing cloths, in exchange for a financial donation. On one level, the verse seems crass, like it is promoting something superstitious.

I am more sanguine regarding this passage. I think that some who take offense at verse 12 take themselves too seriously. I see this as a reflection of God’s sense of humor. It is all right for God to work through odd quirky people and quirky ideas. God is at work nonetheless. There is power in Paul’s preaching because there is power in the name of Jesus. So, verse 12 reminds us not to take ourselves too seriously. The next verses provide an important added insight: Do take God seriously. Do take the spiritual world seriously. God will not be manipulated: never presume a spiritual power you do not possess.

God will not be manipulated: never presume a spiritual power you do not possess

¹³ Then some of the itinerant Jewish exorcists undertook to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, “I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul proclaims.”

¹⁴ Seven sons of a Jewish high priest named Sceva were doing this. ¹⁵ But the evil spirit answered them, “Jesus I know, and Paul I recognize, but who are you?” ¹⁶ And the man in whom was the evil spirit leaped on them, mastered all of them and overpowered them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded.

We declare in the Nicene Creed we “*believe in all that is, seen and unseen.*” As your pastor, as a preacher, I talk often about the unseen world. I believe that part of my job as a preacher on Sunday mornings is to open windows of spiritual truth for you to

peer through. I preach about the moral laws God has woven into creation; about God's purposes in human history; about family, meaning, and spiritual truth: especially as that truth is summed up and revealed in the sacrificial work of Jesus Christ upon the cross. I talk about the unseen world a great deal.

That said, I do not talk much about the dark side of the unseen world. Satan is real. There are evil forces at work in our world. There really is such a thing as being possessed by a demon. We live in the modern therapeutic world. In the secular therapeutic world around us, everything bad is perceived as illness. Nothing is *evil*. As Christians, we say, "No, there is an unseen world: both a good unseen world, and a bad unseen world." Not everything is illness. Some things are evil.

To write his book, **Hostage to the Devil: The Possession and Exorcism of Five Americans**, Malachi Martin obtained permission to interview the participants and review the transcripts of these five exorcisms performed and overseen by priest-exorcists trained and appointed by the Roman Catholic church. In one of the exorcisms he describes, the exorcist made a serious mistake: he permitted himself to grow angry at the demon with whom he was dealing. A fundamental principle in performing an exorcism is that the exorcist acts solely and only in Jesus' name. This makes obvious sense, the exorcist himself possesses no spiritual authority. His authority is wholly that of Jesus Christ's. The exorcist's name was Gerald. The demon was taunting him. Gerald replied, "*As Jesus, our Lord, bore sufferings, so I am willing to bear what it costs to expel you and send you back to where you came from.*" This sounds like heroism. It sounds like something you might hear in a movie. Do you see Gerald's mistake? He declares to the demon, "*so I am willing to bear what it costs to expel you.*" With those words, Gerald is no longer standing before the demon clothed in the authority of Jesus Christ. Gerald claimed his own authority. The demon attacked him at that moment. It was weeks before Gerald was well enough to continue and complete the exorcism.

In Luke 10, Jesus sends out seventy-two disciples to spread the message of the coming kingdom of God. When they return to the spiritual locker room after their mission and ministry in Christ's name, they report (verse 17) The seventy-two returned with joy, saying, "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!" Jesus tells them "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven." In Revelation 20:3, we are told that Satan is no longer able to deceive the nations of this world. The rolling back of Satan's power and kingdom began when Jesus sent out the seventy-two. As long as the church is at work, Satan's kingdom continues to recede.

These "Seven sons of a Jewish high priest named Sceva" got themselves into something that was way more than they were capable of dealing with. They wanted a piece of the action. They wanted the power of Jesus' name. But you cannot treat the God of the Bible as you would a pagan God. He is not tame. He will not be manipulated. There is power in Jesus' name, but his name is not a magic talisman – as the sons of Sceva soon learned. As followers of Jesus, we do not need any more power than Christ himself. All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him. These are deep matters and they teach us to show proper respect and fear of the unseen world.

Respect and fear the unseen world

¹⁷ And this became known to all the residents of Ephesus, both Jews and Greeks. And fear fell upon them all, and the name of the Lord Jesus was extolled.

The “seven sons of...Sceva” literally got their butts kicked by the unnamed evil spirit and the word quickly spread around town. There was a two-fold result in the telling of the story. “Fear fell upon them all, and the name of the Lord Jesus was extolled.” If nothing else, people learned to take seriously the reality of the unseen spiritual world about them. And, the name and reputation of Jesus spread.

A tendency of the modern secular world is to dismiss, even mock, the reality of the spiritual world around us. That is a mistake. One of the hot trends of recent years is what is called “Eco Tourism.” I traveled down the Amazon River with a friend of mine, on our way to a modern jungle lodge. Along the side of the river I could see up ahead of us a family – husband, wife, and young son – standing on a dock. Our boat pulled over and we picked them. They traveled with us to the lodge. The man was a shaman, a witchdoctor. Some of those on our tour were going to have a close encounter with the spirits of the jungle. Those who were interested – I was not among them – met together with the shaman about 10:00 pm that night. He gave them a hallucinogenic drug he had created from bark, leaves and roots of amazon plants. For those who took the drug, their first vision – the shaman had alerted them to expect this – was of a giant python crawling up from their stomach and out their mouth. I could hear the gurgles, the cries, the laughter of the participants unfolding through most of the night.

In the end, I do not know what those folk experienced that night. But I was uneasy with the idea of so blithely opening up the door to a spiritual world unknown to us. There is danger in getting involved in what you do not understand. The Bible teaches that the fear of the Lord is a good thing. It is. Many today do not fear God. That is a bad thing. The unseen world deserves our respect. It should be approached with caution.

The report goes out. The word of Christ spreads. Many come to faith in Christ. One consequence of coming to faith is that they then turn concretely from evil.

Turn to Christ and concretely turn from evil

¹⁸ Also many of those who were now believers came, confessing and divulging their practices.

¹⁹ And a number of those who had practiced 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.

Oh, I did not mention it, but the shaman considered himself a good Roman Catholic. In the jungles and in the mountains of South America, you will find a lot of religious syncretism. The word syncretism refers to when you put things together that really do not belong together: like kosher bacon. Some years ago at a funeral, the man

offering a eulogy for the deceased, ended his words offering a Native American prayer. Doing that is an example of syncretism. At Fairview Evangelical Presbyterian Church, we pray to God through Jesus Christ, alone. There is no place in this worship space for a prayer to any other God, except God the Father, revealed through Jesus the Son.

The Bible understands the danger of syncretism. This is why St. Luke highlights that after their conversion to Christ, many of these new believers came, confessing and divulging their practices. ¹⁹ And a number of those who had practiced magic arts brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all. They got rid of those things that brought them into contact with the dark side of the unseen world: magic books, divining dice, idols, talismans, cards designed to tell the future, and so on. They confessed and discarded things that got in the way of their walk with the Lord Jesus. The summer I spent in Guatemala, the local shaman in the village where I stayed came to faith in Christ. He turned in his divining stones and other shaman stuff – it became my job to get rid of it.

Coming to faith in Christ means cleaning house. The new converts in Ephesus burned their magic books. They got rid of that which connected and tied them to the dark side of the spiritual world. Books in the ancient world were very expensive. That is why St. Luke highlights the cost of the books burned. You may be thinking, “Should we still burn books today?” Well, that is the wrong question. The correct question is: “Should we destroy those things that connect us to the dark side of the spiritual world?” The answer to that is, “Yes.” As a young man, after my own conversion to Christ, I remember the freedom that accompanied destroying the Ouija board I owned. I never used it much. But I knew that it was not an appropriate possession spiritually.

Now, I realize that some are probably wondering, “Okay Pastor Mark, I get it that coming to faith in Christ means cleaning house. We need to get rid of those things that connect to the dark side of the spiritual world. But how does this connect to the Harry Potter series of books, which you have spoken of so favorably today, and in the past.”

Good question. Let me try and answer it.

When I was pastor of the Union Church of Lima, (UCL), Peru, the church rented space to the International Christian School of Lima (ICSL). Like any good school, ICSL included a lending library as part of its educational program. And, though much less formal, the church offered a lending library of English language books available to the foreign community of Lima. The headmaster of ICSL and I knew each other well, recognizing certain significant theological differences between us. We were both Christian, to be sure, but John, the headmaster, was a very intentional Baptist in his thinking. Both the school and the church received many donations to our respective libraries. John declared that he would not permit the school to receive donations of any of the Harry Potter books. He gave them to me, for the church library. For my part, I declared that the church library would not receive any donations from Tim LaHaye’s “Left Behind” series of books. These we gave to ICSL.

I know what you are thinking, “*Pastor Mark, the Left Behind series talks about the return of Jesus Christ. It claims to be specifically Christian. And, the Harry Potter books deal with witches, goblins, spells and magic. Why would you reject Left Behind and embrace Harry Potter?*”

Regarding the Left Behind series, I know that the books are wildly popular. And I am sure that Tim LaHaye was a sincere Christian, a follower of Jesus Christ. But the Left Behind series of stories is founded on a particular type of theology called Dispensationalism. I do not have time to go into the details today. Let me say that Dispensationalism is a serious theological error. If you are interested in talking further regarding dispensationalism, let me know and we can find a time to talk about it. In short, this is why I would not put the Left Behind series on the shelf of the church library.

Harry Potter, on the other hand, is first a story. It is literature. Like “Left Behind” it is a work of imagination. Sure, on the surface the Harry Potter stories talk about giants, wizards, witches, spells and magic. Beyond these things, the question to ask is, “What is the moral vision of the Harry Potter stories?” The Harry Potter series has a solid moral vision, one that we can affirm as Christian believers. From the first book, where Harry’s mom’s sacrifices herself for Harry; Harry becomes “*the boy who lived.*” In the last book, Harry sacrifices himself, for the sake of his friends, Hogwarts his school, and to defeat evil. Harry makes mistakes and commits sins, to be sure, but the overall moral message of the series is spot on.

In review, we began by noting first that God often works through gifted men and women. Next, surprisingly but equally importantly, God also works through odd and quirky means. In the story of the sons of Sceva, we noted that the God of the Bible will not be manipulated. From them we learn to respect, and fear, the unseen spiritual world. We were told of men and women coming to Christ in faith and, in doing so, of their cleaning house: getting rid of the things that connected them to the dark side of spiritual reality. Now, lastly, we note that a consequence of these things is that the kingdom spreads.

Watch as the kingdom spreads

²⁰ So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily.

The word of the Lord continued to spread. The word of the Lord continues to spread today. My question to you as we close is, “Has it spread to you?” There is a spiritual world out there. As men and women, we need to be remade. We need to hear the call of Christ in our lives. We must turn to him in faith and belief; turning away in repentance from sin, darkness and spiritual evil.

Have you done so? Do you believe in Christ? Have you repented of your sin and looked to him alone for the salvation of your soul?

Do so today.

Say "Amen" Somebody!

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