

Acts 18:23-19:20: Religion Jesus or Relationship Jesus?

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I. Introduction

Some people find comfort in Jesus the way they find comfort in their favorite lucky charm or therapist. They go to church on Sunday, read a devotional, say a prayer, etc., looking for relief. Sometimes they find it; sometimes it lasts longer than a day. But eventually the relief goes away and they have to call on Jesus the wizard once again. Jesus is not a sorcerer; He's a Savior.

II. Acts 18:23-19:20: Religion or Relationship, Which One Is Jesus Offering You?

18:23-28, Paul ended the Second Missionary Journey with over a year and a half stay in Corinth then making a brief visit to Ephesus, where he left Priscilla and Aquila before returning to Antioch. After some time, Paul decided to return to the mission field; this time he left alone. He began by revisiting all the churches they had planted, starting in Galatia and Phrygia (modern-day central Turkey). Paul's main goal as a missionary was not to offer a new religion, a new belief system. He didn't want followers of a new religion; he wanted followers of Christ, which is why he taught people not only to believe in Jesus Christ but to live like Him. Thus from the first missionary journey Paul taught believers how to be followers of Christ (15:36; 14:21-22).

Paul's making his way to Ephesus, but before Luke tells us about that, he introduces us to a Jewish man named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, who came to Ephesus. He was an eloquent man, meaning he was well-educated, especially in rhetoric, which is why he was an excellent speaker. He got his training in Alexandria, a city that was known for its famous university (and great library) and was the center of Hellenistic philosophy. Alexandria was the capital city of Egypt and the second most important city in the Roman Empire. Though Apollos was well-trained in the Scriptures and knew the way of God, he only knew the Gospel of Jesus as it related to the baptism of John. What he knew, he taught passionately in the synagogue. When Aquila and Priscilla heard him, they took him aside and explained to him more fully the Gospel of Christ (he was a believer in Christ but was lacking information). He then wanted to go to Corinth so the brethren of Ephesus wrote him a letter of commendation. The church of Corinth received him and he was able to help them tremendously as he refuted from the Scriptures the Jewish individuals who rejected Jesus' Messiahship. Why the mention of Apollos? It serves to introduce Paul's ministry in Ephesus, which also begins with a comment about John's Baptism. But perhaps it serves to highlight the similarities between Jesus and Paul: John the Baptist served as Jesus' forerunner, Apollos in a sense serves as Paul's forerunner in Ephesus. Paul will start his ministry (in Ephesus) with twelve disciples whom he baptizes with the Holy Spirit as Jesus did at Pentecost. Like Jesus, Paul goes on to perform miraculous signs as he battles Satan's spiritual forces. Paul will establish a church that will reach all of Asia as Jesus founded a church that reached the ends of the earth. Finally, as Jesus did, Paul will set his sights on Jerusalem where he will be arrested and put on trial.

19:1-7, having visited the Galatian churches and continued their discipleship, Paul heads for Ephesus. Previously, the Holy Spirit prevented Paul from ministering in Asia (Acts 16:6), but now it was time. Ephesus was one of the top three cities of the East (next to Alexandria of Egypt and Antioch of Syria). It had 250,000 to 500,000 people and was the leading commercial city of Asia. It was the seat of the Roman proconsul of Asia and it rivaled Corinth in its immorality. It was the center of sorcery and practice of the black arts.

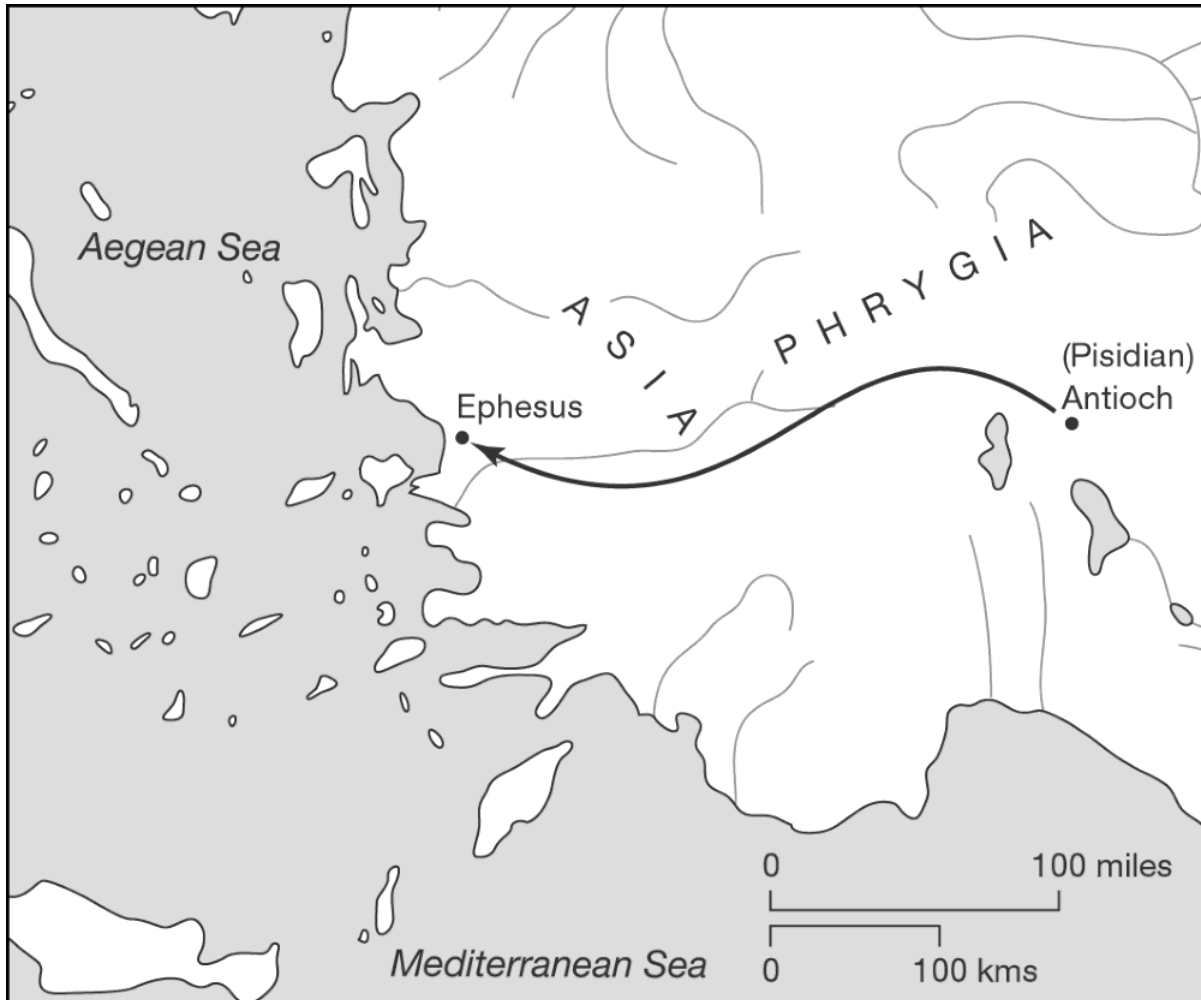
It housed the temple of the goddess Diana (Artemis—her Greek name), who was the multi-breasted goddess of fertility. The temple was the center of pagan worship, which included blood sacrifices and religious prostitution. It was one of the Seven Wonders of the World. It had 117 to 127 columns that stood 60' high and 6' wide. It took 220 years to build and was four times the size of the Pantheon in Athens. Ephesus had culture, money, politics, commerce, and power—social, civic, but especially spiritual power. Paul's about to do battle with serious spiritual forces who've enslaved the Ephesians. This may be why his ministry begins with a mini-Pentecost, i.e., an outpouring of the Holy Spirit including the gift of tongues upon 12 disciples (cf. Acts 2).

When Paul gets to Ephesus, he finds 12 disciples of John the Baptist. He asks them if they received the Holy Spirit when they believed. But they weren't aware that the Holy Spirit had been given by the Lord. So Paul asks, "Into what then were you baptized?" They said, "Into John's baptism." They'd been baptized into the repentance that John preached, but not into Christ by the Spirit. So Paul explained the full Gospel story and baptized them in the name of Jesus. Paul then laid hands on them and the Spirit came upon them and they spoke in tongues and prophesied.

19:8-10, as his custom was, Paul went to the Jewish folks first. For three months (Paul's longest ministry in a synagogue) he reasoned with those in the synagogue, persuading them about the various facets of the Kingdom of God and its King, Jesus, the Messiah. But when some hardened their hearts and spoke evil of the Gospel of Christ, he left, withdrew the disciples (likely the twelve), and began daily reasoning with the Gentiles in the school of Tyrannus. Tyrannus was a popular Greek rhetorician who was the main teacher, founder, or owner of the school which was dedicated to intellectual pursuits. Paul used this school for two years and so many were converted that everyone in the province of Asia, both Jews and Gentiles, heard the word of the Lord Jesus! Thus Paul, Aquila, Priscilla, the 12 Paul disciples, and others made disciples who made disciples (this is likely how the other Asian churches were planted, Colossians 1:7; 4:13; Revelation 1:11).

19:11-20, the Ephesians were so oppressed by the demons who were behind all the sorcery that they suffered from disease and demon possession. Then Jesus did unusual miracles through Paul in order to confirm His Word and Paul's apostolic authority: aprons and handkerchiefs that Paul used were brought to the sick and possessed and their diseases and demons left! Peter was the only other apostle who did such miracles (Acts 5:14-16). But the power was not in Peter or Paul (2 Corinthians 12:7-10; 2 Timothy 4:20), it was in Jesus Christ. Those who'd heard Paul heal and cast out demons thought that the power lie in an incantation which contained Jesus' name. So some traveling exorcists decided to try it, particularly seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest (a former chief priest, since chief priests served in Jerusalem and wouldn't dare practice sorcery, Deuteronomy 18:10-14). The result was one of the funniest scenes in Scripture. The demon responded, "Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are you?" At which point, the man possessed by the demon jumped on them and beat them mercilessly sending them out of the house naked and wounded. Everyone in Ephesus heard about this and fear fell on them all. Many who'd believed in Christ, including those who practiced magic, confessed their sorcery publicly and made a giant bonfire of their magic books, whose value was likely in the millions. The result: the name of the Lord Jesus was magnified and His Word "grew mightily and prevailed."

Which Jesus do you walk with? Jesus doesn't offer temporary relief; He offers an eternal relationship that gives you access to His power, a power that will do beyond anything you could ever ask or imagine (Ephesians 1:19; 3:20). Satan's spiritual forces are powerful, but they're no match for the God (Ephesians 6:10-17). Jesus freed many in Asia not because they used His name in an incantation, but because they entered into relationship with Him and learned how to live like Him, how to walk with Him and the Father through their fears and dilemmas.



III. Conclusion

Now God worked unusual miracles by the hands of Paul, so that even handkerchiefs or aprons were brought from his body to the sick, and the diseases left them and the evil spirits went out of them. Then some of the itinerant Jewish exorcists took it upon themselves to call the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, "We exorcise you by the Jesus whom Paul preaches." Also there were seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, who did so. And the evil spirit answered and said, "Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are you?" Then the man in whom the evil spirit was leaped on them, overpowered them, and prevailed against them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded. This became known both to all Jews and Greeks dwelling in Ephesus; and fear fell on them all, and the name of the Lord Jesus was magnified. And many who had believed came confessing and telling their deeds. Also, many of those who had practiced magic brought their books together and burned *them* in the sight of all. And they counted up the value of them, and *it* totaled fifty thousand *pieces* of silver. So the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed.

¹ Wright, T. (2008). *Acts for Everyone, Part 2: Chapters 13-28* (pp. 110). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.