

Your Witness Confirmed by a Work of God
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What we're gonna do today is I have one basic goal for you today. There's a couple things that come off of it, but there's one primary goal, and that is I wanna raise in your mind the possibility—I just want you to be walking out of here today sensing that it's just very possible, realistically possible; now I'm not even asking you to be convinced that it's probable...I just want you to be convinced that it's possible, not hypothetically, distant, maybe, but it is realistically possible—that your witness for God, your speaking of the reality of Jesus Christ, your testimony of Jesus, in whatever your varied circumstances and conditions may be, that your witness for God could be, might be, very possibly confirmed by a working of God; that as you speak of Jesus, in your family, in your work, among your friends, in the neighborhood, wherever, that it's very possible God may choose to work in you, through you, and around you in ways that will point to the reality of Jesus, that will cause people to say, "God's behind this!"; that He could maybe, possibly, really work miracles through you and around you. I wanna raise that possibility in your mind as a realistic possibility. And as I do so, my desire is that I also give you a perspective with which to hold that possibility, and finally a practice—how to practice and go forward with that possibility in mind. And we're gonna do it using chapter 19 of the book of Acts. So I'm gonna ask you to turn in your bibles there, the 19th chapter of the book of Acts. And we are gonna be doing...what I'm gonna use is one of the most dramatic examples in all of scripture of God working miracles to confirm a witness to the reality of Jesus...God working miracles in witness to the reality of Jesus. And we're gonna use that very dramatic example to raise that possibility in your own mind, and do it so with the perspective that would be biblical.

And we're gonna, as you turn in your bibles there, I'll just give you a sense of where we are, a sense of setting and situation. It is about twenty-five years, at least, after Christ has been buried, risen, and raised from the dead, and His apostles, His key witnesses, had been sent out to testify of His reality. And one of those, the Apostle Paul, is on a journey. It's his third journey, major missionary journey recorded and given an account of in the book of Acts. And he had started out in Antioch and he had made his way across Asia Minor...it's called Asia in our text. He made his way across modern-day Turkey and came to the city of Ephesus. And this whole episode will take place in the city of Ephesus. It's a...it was a center city of the region. It was a commercial city, a commercial center; it was on trade routes. It had a great, deep port that they constantly had to try to dredge because silt would fill it up. But they were a commercial center.

Not only were they a commercial center...they were a religious center. This city had the great temple to the goddess, the fertility goddess, Artemis. And that temple was one of the Seven Wonders of the World. And it was a center where people came from all over the Mediterranean world and beyond, bringing money, bringing special requests, and everything else. They came there to worship this pagan goddess. And so they had pilgrims, and they had priests, and they had everything in this city revolving around this pagan goddess, and pagan religious cults, and worship. It was a religious center. That temple was one of the Seven Wonders of the World at that time. The prosperity and the richness that this city enjoyed from that made that temple like the Swiss bank of its day. It was an amazing city. And Paul is there.

And when he arrives he finds something that is a little different, a little unusual, that he didn't find in some of the other cities. What he found when he came to the city of Ephesus was there were some believers with an inadequate understanding of Jesus and what He's about. You see, the gospel had been out there long enough that it had begun to spread, and it was being carried around by people who were not apostles. And it was getting distorted by some, and when Paul comes to Ephesus he finds that there's some believers there who have heard the gospel from other people, but they haven't gotten the actual apostolic, the basic, message that Jesus committed to go out through his apostles. And the book of Acts, in 19, records two of these. Actually, the first one is a man by the name of Apollos, and he's introduced at the end of chapter 18...an eloquent speaker. And he knew about Jesus, he believed in Jesus, but he only had a limited understanding. And he was speaking in the synagogue, talking about Jesus, but he was limited in his understanding. And there were some individuals there that had been with Paul, and they had helped him, and they gave him a more adequate understanding, we're told. And then Apollos moves on; he goes to Corinth. He became one of the most powerful spokesmen for Christianity of that era. He doesn't surface in chapter 19, but I give you that as a little bit of background.

The chapter opens up and Paul arrives at Ephesus, and he meets a group of twelve men who were believers, but they had only had the teaching of John the Baptist. They just believed there would be a Christ. They didn't know who He would be. And Paul addresses their lack of understanding. He points them to Jesus, and they become believers in the truth of the gospel.

People spend a lot of time on these two instances. Commentaries, if you pick 'em up, the book of Acts just bogs down in this section, and they debate all kinds of things related to this. The problem is there is very little information we have given as to exactly what these people believed. This is not a section to delve into and try to prove a great bit of theology. It's just a simple testimony that there were people out there who didn't fully understand, and they needed things more fully explained by this time in church history. It does confirm what I call the 'Conversion Cluster' that you find in the faith—of repentance, of faith in Jesus marked by baptism and the promised Holy Spirit. That cluster of things that come with conversion are confirmed in here, but their sequence and how they're brought about, and stuff like that, is not the point of emphasis.

So that's our little bit of background. Paul arrives at this religious center, and as he arrives there's believers there, but they're ungrounded. They don't have a full understanding. And so he begins his witness. And that's where we're gonna focus and begin to look at first of all.

He goes into the synagogue... And I'm gonna read this. He comes into the synagogue, in verse 8, we're told, and he enters the Jewish synagogue...

...and continued speaking out boldly for three months, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God.

He went in there and began to witness there first. That was his usual pattern when he went into a new community, was go among the Jews who were looking for the Messiah, and begin to explain to them, and reason with them, and persuade them that the Messiah, Jesus, has come. He was crucified, raised, and He's alive today and will return.

But we're told, in verse 9, that

Some were becoming hardened and disobedient; they were speaking evil of the Way...

That's the terminology used for the Christian walk.

They were speaking evil of the Way before the people. And so he withdrew from them and took away the disciples, reasoning daily [it says] in the school of Tyrannus.

And I kinda like that, the name meaning, simply, 'tyrant.' Isn't that a great name for the principal of a school? Ok? So he went to this school; he rented a hall, in essence is what he did, and he began to teach. And he began to teach daily. In fact, we're told that he...as the verse goes on, this took place...he was reasoning daily in the school of Tyrannus...

This took place for two years, so that [we're told] all those who lived in the region of Asia Minor heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.

And so Paul comes into this religious center; and as he comes in he recognizes, 'Hey, there's some understanding, but it's not adequate,' and he begins to give witness to the reality of Jesus. And he does so day after day after day after day in this rented hall. And the word goes out, and pretty soon that whole region of Asia Minor, modern-day Turkey, has heard about Jesus in an accurate way. That's the witness of Paul. The next section gives us the working of God. And I love this next verse, verse 11. It says

God was performing extraordinary miracles in the hands of Paul...

I love that...extraordinary miracles. Literally, in the Greek, it reads like this—'miracles not of the ordinary sort.' It goes on and gives a description of what this might be like. I mean, it goes on, it says in verse 12, kind of a case in point to show us an example, it says

...so that handkerchiefs or aprons were even carried away from his body to the sick, and the diseases left them and the evil spirits went out.

They would take a handkerchief from Paul that he had touched, and they would bring it and give it to a sick person, and he would be well. It goes on with another incident, almost comical in the next section; it describes how some exorcists—some guys that were trying to cast out demons—tried to do it the way they saw Paul do it. And they called upon the name of Jesus. And we're told the demon reacts and beats 'em up and sends 'em scurrying away. And the outcome of this sort of thing that was going on through the Apostle Paul is described in verse 17. It says

This became known to all, both Jews and Greeks, who lived in Ephesus; and fear fell upon them all and the name of the Lord Jesus was being magnified.

They began to say, 'Whoa! There is really something about this Jesus that Paul talks about. Even the demons respect Him!'

It says in verse 18 that kinda follows up, it says

Many also of those who had believed kept coming, confessing and disclosing their practices.

Remember, this was a religious center steeped in the worship of pagan gods and dealing with the spirit realm all the time. And there were many Christians who were doing the same thing; and they had little formulas and chants, and special spirits that they would call on. And they were all trying to deal with the unseen and make things happen. And after this takes place, after they see what's happening through Paul, many of those who believe decide they'd come forward and they would... they confess and they say, 'You know what? We've been dabbling with the unseen.' And it says, verse 19,

Many of those who practiced magic brought their books together...

...their books with the formulas and the chants, and the secret chants they were supposed to use, and the names that they could pronounce over certain situations....they brought those together,

...and they began burning them in the sight of everyone.

And it says at the very end of that verse, fifty thousand pieces of silver—that's what the burn pile was worth. Kinda wonder what that was. A drachma, a piece of silver, was worth a day's wages. Compute that out at a minimum wage of our day...we're talking about 2.9 million dollars worth of books being burned up. See, the economy...the economy in Ephesus was built around the temple, and built around all this magic and this sorcery, and this pagan worship and this calling on the spirits. And the most valuable thing you could have was these books that had their secret chants and their names of powerful spirits. And these Christians were coming forward saying, 'You know, we've been doing this. Let's just burn it and get rid of it!'

The result of all this...the result of all this is given in verse 20. It says

So the word of the Lord was growing mightily and prevailing.

Kinda interesting wording here. It says the word of the Lord was growing, and it was growing by might, or according to power. And it was prevailing...it was conquering the 'dark side', as it were. That's what happened. Paul came, began to give word of witness, God begins to work with confirming miracles, extraordinary miracles, and the word of God begins to grow and to spread. That's what took place.

It's an example of what God can do...an example of what God can do through you. The immediate reaction may be, 'Wait a minute...I'm not Paul.' And I would agree. You say, 'But Paul was an apostle, and I'm not an apostle.' And I would agree. But I wanna say this statement, and I'll follow it up with a follow-up statement—the scripture indicates, and history demonstrates, that the apostles were a unique group of individuals who did unique ministries and works of power. They were unique. The scriptures indicate that; history demonstrates that. There has never been another group of individuals like that original group of apostles in terms of miracle working. There's never been a group like that since. It was part of their credentials. It was not *all* their credentials, but it was part of their credentials as an apostle. When they went to give the authoritative proclamation of the gospel in these places where people had either not heard it or didn't have an accurate understanding, their credentials...they had actually seen Jesus. They had been commissioned by Him. And they had these works of miracles that would verify it. And they also were verified and had credentials of other people who had responded to their message and been transformed. The apostles were a unique group. Scripture indicates that; history demonstrates that. There's never been a group like them since.

But scriptures also indicate, and history demonstrates, that God can, has, and will do miracles through Christians who are not apostles. It happened in the New Testament record. There are individuals who were not apostles in the early church who performed amazing miracles. It happened in the early church history. After the New Testament was written, we move out of that early church, there's a major drop-off in the quantity and the power of miracles. But there were still miracles. And throughout church history you will find witness and testimony, throughout church history, of miracles being done through Christians, ordinary individuals like you and I. And you will find that witness today. There are things being done in places in our world that are astounding and amazing, and they are miracles—being done by God through His people. There's many things that are claimed to be miracles that are not; there are many other religions and faiths of different sorts that have dramatic wonder-working powers going on within them. But none of that countermands the fact that there are Christians through whom God works miracles in various circumstances and conditions. The possibility is there, realistically.

The first time this hit me was one of my best friends was a doctor. He was going through his internship. And I was in seminary, and he was in his medical internship. I was in Washington, he was in California, and we were talking one day. And he says...and we were on the phone, and... Actually, we went down to visit him. And we were visiting. And he was describing to me...he says, "You know, I had a guy come into my clinic, and I did the whole work-up on him. I did the whole work-up on him. I did the tests, I did the diagnosis, and everything else. And this guy was a severe diabetic." He said he came back a week later and he was in perfect health! I asked him what happened. He said, "He went to a church and they prayed for him."

What do I do? Go look at my friend and say, "You lied." Go look at my friend who's done the work-up and say, "You are mistaken." Go look at my friend and say, "God would never do that. He stopped it long ago." Or do I say, "Whoa! That is amazing!"

The possibility is there. But let me get to perspective. And boy, time-wise I'm gonna be careful with this, 'cause this subject people get really confused about. If I go a little late, just remember I've been gone for four weeks.

Let's go through perspective. I wanna cover this carefully. Number one—you need to have the perspective. If you're gonna hold this possibility in mind...ok, if you're gonna hold this in mind, you have to have the perspective that there are other ways for the Christian witness to grow and to prevail. You have to understand that. You have to have that perspective as you hold this possibility in mind. For example, let me give you just a quick kinda comparison. In Ephesus, where it is so steeped with spiritual open demonic manifestation, and you have a culture that is dramatically working with spirits, where there's all kinds of supernatural phenomena going on as they deal with demons, and they call out to pagan gods...in that city we have Paul working extraordinary miracles. And it's not a good example for a preacher to use, but I will use it. It's like a poker game; and the demonic does something, and God says, "I'll see that and raise you." Ok?

You read that account of when Paul went to Athens, the city that really didn't care about wonders, and works, and powers—they wanted to know 'What's your ideas? How's the philosophy fit together? Do you have a new concept? And if it's a new concept, is it logical? Does it hold together? We want to explore your philosophy of life, your world view.' You know what happens in Athens? He doesn't do a single miracle. He stands up and he preaches the reality of Jesus Christ; he doesn't even quote scripture to do it. He brings up their philosophy and tackles it, and exposes it for the failure that it is. He engages them in philosophical debate and the power of the Spirit.

And then the one that really intrigues me is when he goes to the center of power, the city of Rome. Now, they didn't care about supernatural powers. They didn't care about intellectual concepts. They wanted to know who has control, and it's the guy with the biggest army. And you know how God brings Paul's witness to the city of Rome? He brings Paul into Rome as a prisoner. No miracles. He's just chained. And he shares the gospel, and his prison guards hear him and start responding.

God works, and the work of God spreads different ways, different places. And we need to understand that. It's a basic analogy. The U.S. military knows you do not fight the same type of war in Afghanistan that you do in Iraq. Your tactics and your strategies better change, because the enemies' tactics and strategies change. Our God works the same way, and it does not surprise me at all that in certain areas of Africa, where they're steeped in the occult and the demonic that you are gonna find supernatural displays of God's power that are just astounding, that you may not see in Wasilla, because the enemy's tactics here may be of a different sort. And God's gonna take a different approach to those. Our danger is, as Christians, is we decide you fight the same way everywhere you go, regardless if it's Iran, Afghanistan, or where. No, you respond to what God's doin', and the way He's doin' it where He's at. That's the first thing. Whoa.

Let's go to the second perspective you have to have. There will still be unbelief and even resistance. There's a mindset that if we could just pull off a really big miracle people would respond. If we could just pull off this really great demonstration of power, Wasilla would go on its knees and say Jesus is Lord! And the only reason we haven't won this city for Christ is because we're powerless, and we need to plug into the power. This thing happens in Ephesus, this city where the Apostle Paul did extraordinary miracles. We're told near the end of this chapter, verse 21 [should be verse 23], that

About that time there occurred no small disturbance concerning the Way.

What it was, was a riot. There were so many people turning away from the occult...I mean, they burned almost two million, over two million dollars worth of their occultic books and stuff like that...and they began to panic, they began to say, 'You know what? The religious trade here is gonna be hurt, it's gonna be devastated! Our temple's gonna be abandoned.' And so there's a silversmith who made silver idols and replicas of the fertility goddess. And he starts up this riot. And he gets the whole city in an uproar. And they began to march through the streets, and they're yelling, you know, "Great is Artemis, the goddess of Ephesus!" And they chant, and they began to grab people, and they end up in the theater in Ephesus, this massive theater. It holds twenty-five thousand people, so picture this—twenty-five thousand people angry at the Christians because 'they're takin' away our business!' And in that center, in that theater, they began to chant. And we have this verse down in verse 34 that there's

...a single outcry arose from them and they shouted for about two hours, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!"

Can you imagine that? Twenty-five thousand people shouting for two hours, 'Great is our goddess!' It's the very city where Paul did extraordinary miracles. There will still be unbelief, and even resistance.

And then here's the third thing. There are things more important than extraordinary miracles, and you gotta track with me closely on this. Paul went on from Ephesus after the riot. He stayed a little while longer, he moved on, and he left Ephesus. He went across the Aegean Sea, went up and down the coast of modern-day Greece, and then he came back. And he was on his way to Jerusalem; and on his way to Jerusalem he stops in Miletus, close to Ephesus, and the elders of the church of Ephesus come down to see him. And they recognize that this is probably going to be the last time they spend with the Apostle Paul. There's a sense of dread to this scene, and it's found in Acts 20, and I encourage you to turn there with me. There's a sense of dread here, that the Apostle Paul's sayin' 'Something's gonna happen to me. I know it.' And they understand it, and they begin to sense that 'We're not gonna see Paul again.' And as he meets with them in this real heartfelt, powerful setting, we're told that, in verse 18 of chapter 20 as he's with them, and he meets with these elders, and it's their final time together he says

"You yourselves know, from the first day that I set foot in Asia, how I was with you the whole time, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials which came upon me through the plots of the Jews of the synagogue. And yet I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house."

He says, 'Listen, you know when I was with you I kept talkin' about Jesus anywhere and everywhere.' Now, near the end of that he talks some more to 'em. He reminds them of their responsibility of elders. Then he makes an interesting statement down in verse 33. And if you drop down there you'll see it. He says

"I have coveted no one's silver or gold or clothes."

'I've been here three years,' ultimately he spent there in Ephesus, and he said, 'In that entire time,' he says, 'I never coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothes.'

"You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my own needs and the men who were with me."

Paul was a tentmaker. And he says, 'You know that over those three years I used these hands to make tents to provide for myself and my ministry team.' He says

"In everything I showed you that by working hard in this manner you must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, that 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

So here's Paul, his last time with them. He's reminiscing with them about the past. He's sayin', 'You remember how I kept talkin' about Jesus, and you remember how these hands worked hard making tents to provide for myself and those around me.' You know what? You will not find in this entire final meeting...he never says, 'Do you remember the miracles I did?' He never says, 'Do you remember when that guy touched my handkerchief and became well?' It intrigues me when he says, "I worked hard with these hands."

It was in chapter 19 we were told that God worked extraordinary miracles through those hands. And Paul doesn't talk about that. He says, 'I worked hard for you.' And you know the handkerchief that's mentioned? In the Greek it refers to a sweat band. The apron that is mentioned that they took to people was a worker's apron. And what he's sayin' is, 'You know what? When I worked in my shop people kept takin' my sweat bands. I couldn't find them. And I'd turn around to grab my work apron and it'd be gone, and somebody was out touchin' it. We're not talking about nice little hand-crafted handkerchiefs with a bible verse on 'em that you send in an offering and they come with a guarantee of a miracle. We're talkin' about a sweat band from a man who is slogging away for three years just so he can speak about Jesus.

There's something far more important than miracles. There's your walk, and there's your witness.

So what do we do with this? Here's what I'm going to encourage you to do. I'm gonna encourage you to walk out of here today genuinely thinking that there is a definite possibility God could work through you to confirm your testimony of Jesus; and He could do it in amazing, astounding ways. Do not put God in a box and limit Him to your expectations. Let Him be God. But do so understanding that there's other ways the gospel spreads, and some places they are far more effective; and understanding and gripping the idea that it isn't going to solve the resistance issue. Because faith doesn't come by miracles; it comes by hearing the word of God. And lastly, you have something more important to do than work a miracle. You give witness. You walk with grace. Let God work what He's gonna do.

Let's stand.

[Congregation sings the blessing song.]

Go in His grace.