

# The Prevailing Word of God

SERMON

By

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**TEXT:** Acts 19:11-20

**PROP:** We must see that the preaching of the word of God with the power of the Spirit of God, is the cause of the word of God prevailing over all opposition.

Acts 19:11-20 (ESV)

**11** And God was doing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, **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. **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. **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. **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. **20** So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily.

The apostle Paul having completed his second missionary journey visited the churches in Asia Minor a third time settling for more than two years in Ephesus. Apollos had been in Ephesus where Aquilla and Priscilla had explained the way of God more accurately resulting in Apollos' vigorous public refutation of the Jews showing from the Scriptures that Jesus is the Messiah. By the time Paul had returned to Ephesus on his third journey, Apollos had gone over to Corinth and Paul found that the disciples there were deficient in their knowledge of Christ and the Holy Spirit. After teaching these disciples we read,

Acts 19:5-6 (ESV)

**5** On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. **6** And when Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking in tongues and prophesying.

The early church enjoyed these wonderful gifts but as we have seen they were subjected to much hostility and persecution. The time would come for them to be tortured and give their lives for the sake of Christ and God in his mercy prepared them for the great ordeals they would face. Indeed it was not long before the Jews were stirred up by Paul's bold preaching in the synagogue as he reasoned and persuaded them concerning the kingdom of God. They became stubborn and rebellious and began to speak evil of the Way as early Christianity was known. Paul removed himself and the disciples to a facility known as hall of Tyrannus where he continued to teach the things of the Lord for two years such that, "All the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.

Tyrannus was probably a teacher of philosophy or rhetoric, who perhaps had been converted and his lecture hall or school was a place where the blasphemous denunciations against the Divine Way which Paul taught could no longer be heard. Here Paul continued for more than two years, bestowing upon the city of Ephesus a longer period of continuous labor than he ever granted to any other place. That all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord does not mean that every individual heard what the apostle had to say. It simply means that all sorts of people heard Paul's message and that his preaching was widely known and his preaching bore much fruit because the gospel he preached was powerful.

Many were only interested in the miracles which Paul performed which were quite extraordinary. We read,

Acts 19:11-16 (ESV)

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

The sons of Sceva took note of these things and perhaps the monetary value of casting out spirits and the notoriety one could gain from performing such miracles moved them to try it on their own. They had heard Paul's preaching as most did but these miracles were the only thing of interest to them. If they had been converted they would have, like Paul and the others, been filled with the Holy Spirit and they would

have learned of Christ and would have been interested in preaching the same gospel as Paul. But we see that the evil spirit they tried to exorcise did not recognize them and literally scared the pants off them leaving them naked and wounded.

The sons of Sceva typified many of the people of that day in that they were enamored with the spirit world. They had occult books and practiced occult rituals all of which follows from the worship of false gods and idols. We either worship the true God or we in effect worship demons. The so called gods, represented in the idols so many worshipped, were really no gods at all. They were non-existent, but the world of demons conjured up by idol worship were and are very real, and they greatly influenced the days of Paul and they continue to influence our day as well. God was pleased to convert many of the people of Ephesus and the word of God prevailed so that they burned their books of occult worship, confessed their sin and believed on the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation. We must see that it was the preaching of the word of God with the power of the Spirit of God that brought these people to destroy their false religion.

It should be very encouraging to us to hear of the triumphs of the gospel in those early days of the church. The historical facts of such conversions are of course of great interest to us but it is very helpful to us to see the word of God prevailing in our own day for the gospel is just the same today as it was two thousand years ago. If we preach the gospel at all, it is the very same gospel which Paul delivered. We may not have all Paul's gifts, or all Apollo's eloquence, but for all practical matters, the same preaching is with us that was with Paul. We may, therefore, expect to see the same results. We may like to think that our age of technology and science makes us different from those of years gone by but the gospel of Jesus Christ was not intended for those early centuries alone. After all, men's hearts have not changed. The people of these United States are actually not at all unlike those of Ephesus. They may dress very differently, and their language is not the same, and their customs may outwardly differ, but physically and spiritually they were just like we are. One man's heart is like another man's, and the sinners of two thousand years ago are very like the sinners of today. If someone were to come to one of our great American cities preaching as Paul preached in Ephesus the results would be very much the same. Those whom the Spirit of God was pleased to convert would believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and be baptized and be saved and the rest would remain enemies of God and hostile to the preaching of his word.

More than that, we have the same Holy Spirit empowering the gospel now as then. The power which rendered the gospel effective in the early church days was not Paul's logic, or Apollo's eloquence. The saving power lay in the Holy Spirit accompanying the divine truth. Now the Spirit of God is not restrained in any way. He is almighty God.

Isaiah 59:1 (ESV)

Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save,  
or his ear dull, that it cannot hear;

He is just as able to make the Word of God the power of God unto salvation to-day as he was then, and, praise God he is still calling many to repentance. Satan is bound so that he cannot deceive the Gentiles and we know of many all over the world even in the darkest of Muslim nations that God has been pleased to save by the power of the gospel which Paul preached, which we also, preach. When Paul and his two or three companions came into Ephesus, they were not one bit different from two or three Christians going into any city in the world with the view of evangelizing it. Of course, they had the gift of miracles, but we have other advantages which they had not. We have printed and electronic media, and religious liberty in most places which they did not possess. We are not at disadvantage today compared with those in Ephesus and we may expect that the God of Paul will work in the United States and elsewhere as he worked at Ephesus.

The word of God that Paul preached and taught was of course what we know as the Old Testament. When Paul entered a Jewish synagogue he read from the Torah and reasoned and persuaded from the sacred writings he had learned from his youth. When he preached to the Gentiles his sermons were informed by the precepts of God from the same Torah. His knowledge of the teachings of Jesus was obtained no doubt by discussions with the eyewitnesses of the majesty of Christ, but we must remember that Jesus himself preached and taught Torah concepts. His Sermon on the Mount illuminated the law of God and corrected Pharisaic distortions but he did not bring an end to any of it. Jesus said,

Matthew 5:17-20 (ESV)

**17** "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. **18** For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. **19** Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. **20** For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Paul most certainly taught this same truth that God requires obedience to his law and the sin of every man consists in his disobedience of the Torah or Law of God. In

order for the Gentiles to understand the nature of their sin and their need for the Savior they must know what the law of God requires of them. Indeed we must understand the reason for the coming of the Messiah to die for our sins. The death of Christ was not politically motivated nor was it punishment for insurrection or breaking Roman law in some way. Jesus the Messiah was put to the cross as a sacrifice for the sins of God's people. He is our kinsman redeemer and our propitiation. His blood covers our sin and renders us righteous before God. The gospel of Jesus Christ does not supercede or change any of these Torah concepts or Old Testament concepts but in fact is informed by them and flows from God's covenant promises to his people all through history. The Torah is the word of God and is that word of God that is embodied in Christ Jesus. Joseph Smith claimed to receive new revelation from the angel Moroni known as the *Book of Mormon*. This revelation corrected a large part of the King James Version of Isaiah and identified Joseph Smith as a prophet after the order of Melchizedek just like Jesus. Muslims also believe a very different version of the Old Testament which was corrected by revelation to Muhammad. Jesus did no such thing. He made no changes to the Torah but expounded it and illumined it just as he told his disciples,

Luke 24:44-49 (ESV)

**44** Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." **45** Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, **46** and said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, **47** and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. **48** You are witnesses of these things. **49** And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high."

In our day many people base their faith and practice upon the New Testament alone and the Old Testament is useful to them only for the Bible stories it contains. This is true for much of the modern evangelical church. Dispensationalists relegate the Torah to the dispensation of law saying that we live in the age of grace not law. *The Trail of Blood* by J. M. Carroll, which purports to be, "The history of Baptist churches from the time of Christ, their founder, to the present day," claims that one of the unerring and infallible marks of the true church is, "The inspired scriptures, and they only, in fact, the New Testament and that only, to be the rule of faith and life, not only for the church as an organization, but for each individual member of the organization."

But the gospel that Paul preached he termed the word of the Lord or as it would be in Hebrew, the word of Yahweh. Peter writes,

1 Peter 1:22-25 (ESV)

**22** Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, **23** since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; **24** for

“ All flesh is like grass  
and all its glory like the flower of grass.  
The grass withers,  
and the flower falls,  
**25** but the word of the Lord remains forever.”

And this word is the good news that was preached to you.

Peter quotes from Isaiah 40:6,8 where the word of the Lord is literally the word of Yahweh and to Isaiah was most certainly the Torah seen as everything that comes from the mouth of God. Peter tells us that we have been born again through this word of God and that it is the good news or gospel that was preached to believers in the early church. For the gospel that is preached to be the same as the gospel preached by Paul it must be informed by and based in God's grand old covenant. According to Paul's teaching in Hebrews chapter 8, the New covenant is not different in substance but is new and different in the way in which it is implemented and administered. The substance of the covenant is that God will be a God to his people and to their children after them and this has not changed. The New covenant is new only in that Christ is its mediator and testator and it involves Gentile nations not just Israel. Whereas Israel of old refused to keep God's Torah under the old covenant, now the Torah under the new covenant will be written on the hearts of his and God, "Will be their God."

These precepts take time to learn and Gentiles who have not been raised in the Torah of God require much patient teaching. Paul therefore spent more than two years teaching the Ephesian Gentiles the whole counsel of God. Indeed, the other churches founded by Paul were visited several times and to most Paul wrote epistles to teach them and help them along in their faith. Then too all of the churches were left in the hands of elders and deacons who continued the instruction of the church of Christ. All of this was involved with planting the word of God. From our text we read,

Acts 19:20 (ESV)

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

The word of the Lord increased and prevailed because it was planted by the apostle and nurtured by faithful teaching. It is interesting to notice how it was planted in Ephesus. He began with twelve disciples of Apollos who were prepared ground, well ploughed, ready for the seed. So he instructed them a little further in the faith, and they believed in the Lord Jesus, and were baptized, and became the nucleus, the first twelve with which to form a Christian church. Even in the most barren country there are some pieces of soil that, like oases, are abundantly fertile. In any company of the most depraved of men there are some hearts made willing by God, who will receive the gospel at once. We must never think, if God sends us upon what looks like hard ground, that it is as hard as it looks. It is our unbelief that is hard. If we conquer that, we will be surprised to find that God has cleared the way for us, and perhaps where we looked to find no friend there shall be a chosen twelve who will be glad to receive us. We should be of good courage, for our Lord has prepared some, and made them ready for us. We must be faithful in our work for the Lord here in Oil City and Franklin to plant the good seed of the word of God and nurture it with patient teaching.

But the Apostle found that there was a great deal of stony ground at Ephesus. The people did not all receive him, though twelve men did, and certainly some women with them. But the rest of the people were not like this. But why should they be? Is the servant of Christ to expect to find all men willing to receive him? If the work which our Master sends us to do is all that easy, where is the honor of doing it? He gives easy work to those who are weak, but if he endows us with his own power, of course he will give us difficulties to overcome. We must not, therefore, flinch because we, are rejected by many, but just buckle on our harness and ask fresh strength from God, and give ourselves to the work. Paul went down to the synagogue, and the Jews allowed him to speak too. After he had spoken, they began to dispute. He answered their questions; he persuaded them, and it appears that a great number of them, after hearing his answers to their difficulties, and listening to his solemn persuasive appeals, were led to believe that Jesus was the Christ, and trust in him, and so were saved. Well, thank the Lord, when we go to plant the gospel anywhere we may expect to find some whose difficulties will quickly yield to further light, who, when they understand the gospel more fully become very cordial to repentance unto life.

There were Gentiles whom God prepared to be nurtured by Paul and Jews who turned from their vain traditions to accept the Messiah and yet another group of Jews to whom he gave clear proof that Jesus was the Messiah, and he urged them to repent of sin. He persuaded them to believe in Jesus, but they were hardened the more by it, and they proved their hardness by speaking evil of the Way. When men will not submit to Christ, they try to find some fault. Perhaps they will slander the preacher, or the people of God, or they will misrepresent the gospel, or they will take up certain phrases and

words, and twist them, misrepresent them. What they will not receive themselves they attack. They won't enter the kingdom of heaven, and those who would enter they hinder if they possibly can. Even when they see the power of the gospel upon others, they will turn it to ridicule. They wonder at the change that is brought to pass but they are filled with wrath against it, and will not submit to Christ. However, though there will always be people like these, we must not be discouraged, for if we are ever able to say, as Paul was,

Acts 20:26 (ESV)

**26** Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all of you,

then we will have gained a great deal as workers in Christ's kingdom. If we are able to say that as Paul did, though Israel is not gathered in, yet Christ will be glorious in his Father's eyes, and Christ's servants will be accepted in him too. We must always remember that after the most diligent ministry some will believe the gospel, and some will not believe it at all. However, the Apostle Paul, though he was beset by those who despised him and lay in wait for his life, did not hesitate to preach the gospel to all men, for we are told that it was known widely in Asia to both Jews and Greeks. He went on scattering his seed, whether it fell on stony ground or among the thistles and thorns. It was his business to scatter the seed and God's business to make it fall in the right place. He that sows is responsible for the sowing, not for the reaping. If he does what his Master commands him, it is his Master's work to take care of the precious seed, and make it spring up. So it is for us here in Oil City and Franklin. If God wants a Reformed work here he will provide for it but we must remain faithful to biblical worship and the teaching of God's whole counsel.

We notice that the church in Ephesus grew. The word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily. A man drops an acorn into the ground, and forgets about it. When he comes back twenty years later he finds a handsome tree, and if he could live to come back in a century he might find a tree that seemed to cover acres with its outspread branches — all from a single acorn. We never know what will come of the planting of the word of God. Paul came to Ephesus and found twelve that came to be taught but when he came to leave Ephesus, the city was shaken to its roots by a great riot. Even so by the grace of God, the gospel grew.

First, there was a church formed in Ephesus, which appears to have been a strong church. There were many elders, and if the elders were in proportion to the people, there must have been a very large church gathered there. This is delightful fruit, to find so many people made believers professing faith in Christ and then formed into Christian churches. Paul had not labored in vain, for he had lit such a lamp in Ephesus as could

not soon be put out. In addition to the church, a great many people in Ephesus had been influenced for they became the friends of Paul if not converts. When we read the rest of the chapter we find that a great mob gathered in the theater on one occasion, stirring up great hostility against Paul. And Paul, wanted to go right into the great amphitheatre to address them, but some of his high-ranking friends persuaded him not to do it for fear that Paul would be injured or killed. Paul wanted to get another chance to speak the Word of God. Such was the courage of God's great missionary to the Gentiles. Would God that we all would find the same courage to speak of Christ and to live as we should before the world around us. We must see that the preaching of the word of God with the power of the Spirit of God, is the cause of the word of God prevailing over all opposition. The gospel will always increase and prevail because it is God's good pleasure to call all sorts of people to himself. May God grant to each one of us courage and strength to serve him in the work of the kingdom of Christ.