

**“The Magic of Harry Potter
or the Miracles of the Apostle Paul?”**
Sermon Series on the *The Way of the Spirit*
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(Acts 19:1-22)

Introduction.

British author J.K. Rowling and the Harry Potter books she wrote took the publishing world by storm several years ago. If you Google the words “Harry Potter,” it brings up over 149 million results now! All told, the seven Harry Potter books have sold a combined 450 million copies worldwide, and they’ve been translated into 42 different languages. Pretty remarkable.

The books chronicle the fantasy adventures of Harry Potter, a plucky orphan boy stranded in suburbia in England. While living with a cruel aunt and uncle, along with their mean son, Harry discovers he has magical powers. Soon he’s attending Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, which is dedicated to producing young wizards who use their magical power for good purposes. And while not exactly a model student at Hogwarts, Harry discovers his true identity and the full extent of his powers, and eventually he boldly challenges and defeats the evil Lord Voldemort.

In the world of make-believe and fairy tales, magic, wizards, and sorcery can be delightful elements of fantasy and intrigue. My kids gobbled up the Harry Potter books, and they would race each other to see who could finish reading the books first. However, in the real world of spiritual warfare, it’s quite a different story. This morning we come to a passage of Scripture that at first glance may look like it has more in common with a Harry Potter fantasy novel than it does real life. But if you think that, you couldn’t be further from the truth.

I. The City of Ephesus.

This isn’t the first time we’ve read about spiritual warfare in the book of Acts. You’ll recall that back in chapter 8, the story of Simon the Magician denounced the practice of dark magic in real life. And in Acts 13 a sorcerer named Bar-Jesus opposed the gospel, and as a result he was struck blind by the apostle Paul. But the thing that stands out in our text today and makes it different from all the other references is where it takes place – the city of Ephesus.

Ephesus was the capital of Asia Minor in what is now modern-day southwest Turkey. Paul traveled there during his 3rd missionary journey, after having planted a church in the city during his 2nd journey, which is mentioned very briefly in Acts 18. Ephesus was the political and commercial center of a large and prosperous region. The city is located on the Cayster River not far from the Aegean Coast, and in the 1st century AD it had a large and thriving port. As a result, it became the chief link for communications and commerce between Rome and the East. Merchants flocked to it, and it was a melting pot of nations and ethnic groups.

The city, which had a population of over 250,000 people, was a leading center for learning and knowledge. It was home to one of the greatest libraries in the ancient world – the library of Celsus, and you can still see the ruins today. It housed between 12,000 and 15,000 scrolls, which was an enormous number at the time. Ephesus also had a large outdoor amphitheater that could seat 25,000 people (that’s bigger than the Dean Dome), and it had a music hall called an “odium” which seated another 1,500 people. They even had a sewage system for the city, and you can still see the toilets in the bath house today!

But what makes Ephesus so intriguing in the context of my earlier comments was that the city was also known as the magic capital of the world. Special books containing secret spells and magical formulas were published in Ephesus, and they were distributed all over the ancient world. And the city had a reputation for being a center of demonic activity.

It was to Ephesus that Paul traveled during his 3rd missionary journey, and there the Lord gave the apostle the power to work extraordinary miracles. All anyone had to do was simply touch something Paul had used in the course of his work as a tentmaker – a handkerchief or work apron, and the person was healed instantly. I believe the reason these miracles happened like this was to demonstrate that the Jesus whom Paul proclaimed is greater than all the powers of darkness. In this city known for its demonic activity, the power of Christ overcame the powers of darkness.

When we read of these things, it may seem to some of us that our contemporary world doesn't have anything in common with a situation like the one we read about in Ephesus. Demons? Magical powers? Exorcisms? That seems like a world away from us today. But is it really so distant from our own world in the 21st century? What about Haitian voodoo? Korean shamanism? African animism? The powers of darkness are still very active in many parts of the modern world today.

A number of years ago, I was in the Dominican Republic on a short-term mission project. A woman brought her sick daughter into the clinic where I was working, and as soon as she came into the building, the little girl began to let out blood-curdling screams. Immediately the physician in charge noticed a voodoo amulet tied around the girl's neck, and he ordered us to take the charm off the little girl and take it outside and burn it.

It was a little leather pouch that a witch doctor in her village had given the girl as a part of a dedication ceremony. It contained a broken cross and torn pieces of Scripture among other things. At first, when we tried to burn it, the pouch wouldn't catch on fire. But eventually after we tore it open, the pouch and its contents began to burn. When we finished our task and came back inside, the little girl was calmly sleeping in her mother's arms, exhausted from the spiritual warfare that had been taking place. The dark power was gone.

Even here in America we have our own version of dark magic and the occult. We have horoscopes and crystals, Ouija boards and tarot cards. Just last week I read about the North Carolina Piedmont Church of Wicca, and I came across a website titled "The Witch's Voice" which said, "Hail and welcome Witches, Pagans, Wiccans and Heathens to the Witchvox home page for North Carolina! The combined North Carolina resource pages have been visited 1,641,054 times as of this moment." I drove down Country Club Road yesterday here in Winston-Salem, and I saw this advertisement in front of a house. It was for a local psychic who says she can tell your fortune. Spiritual activity of a dark nature is happening right here in our state and in our city.

Some of this may appear benign, and perhaps some of the time these things are innocuous. However, I would suggest to you that people today have an increasing fascination with the occult and a heightened interest in the dark side of life. In what ways are you dabbling in the occult and witchcraft, even in innocent ways, yourself? Whenever we involve ourselves in the spiritual forces of darkness, we need to be careful and realize we're playing with a power that is greater than any of us realize. The seven sons of Sceva who we read about today found that to be true themselves.

II. The Seven Sons of Sceva.

The passage tells us that some Jewish exorcists, upon coming into contact with Paul and his preaching about Jesus, attempted to make magical use of this new name they heard. It was thought that if a person could say the name of a spiritual power, that person had authority over the power and could use the name for their own purposes. The seven sons of Sceva assumed that they could utilize

the power of Jesus to their own ends by saying His name in their incantations. But they soon realized that the name of Jesus is not a name to be trifled with!

Luke identifies these exorcists as the "seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish high priest." It's probable that the title was a self-designation manufactured to impress clients. When they tried to use this more powerful name in their exorcisms, Sceva's sons found they were dealing with realities far beyond their ability to cope. The demon they were trying to exorcise turned on them violently, and they fled from the house bleeding and naked. The name of Jesus, like an unfamiliar weapon misused, exploded in their hands, and they were taught a lesson about the danger of using the name of Jesus when they dabbled in the supernatural. I think it's one of the most comical scenes in the whole Bible.

There is a cosmic, spiritual battle that is going on in the world today, and you and I are in the middle of it, whether we realize it or not. The forces of darkness are waging war against God and His holy angels, and these principalities and powers are mighty, they are evil, and they are cunning. Satan would love nothing more than for us to believe he doesn't exist, for when we're unaware of the enemy, he is that much more dangerous. Write him off as a myth, relegate him as a figment of one's imagination, or make him into a caricature of a little man in a red suit with horns and a pitchfork. That's exactly what he wants you to do. But do not be deceived. Satan and his minions are real, and their influence is powerful.

When Lorie and I lived in Dallas a number of years ago, I remember waking up in the middle of the night and sensing an oppressive force of darkness in our room. The presence was so close and so ominous that I actually swatted at it in front of my face. It felt like a physical presence. That's when I realized that Lorie was also awake, and she asked me, "Do you feel it, too?" I said, "Yes," and we began to pray together, calling upon the name of Jesus and the power of His blood, asking for His deliverance from evil. Almost immediately the presence left our room, and there was stillness and peace in the house again. I went and checked on the boys in their bedrooms, and I prayed over them for God's protection.

The fact of the matter is that Satan is real. He is an angry dog, but he's on a leash. And there is nothing he can do without the Father's permission and the Father's ability to rescue us. The Bible says, "*He that is in you is greater than he that is in the world.*" So we don't need to be afraid. But make no mistake about it, there is a spiritual battle between good and evil, light and darkness, and you and I are right in the middle of the battlefield. So be aware and alert.

III. The Lessons We Can Learn.

I believe there are at least two lessons we can learn from this passage which I want to point out by way of application. **First**, these Jewish exorcists tried to tap into the awesome and miraculous power of Jesus Christ without knowing the Savior themselves. The response of the demon is one of the great moments in Scripture: "*Jesus I know, and Paul I know, but who are you?!*" And at this, the man who had the evil spirit jumped on the 7 Jewish exorcists and overpowered them all. The lesson is this: **We can't appropriate the power of the Holy Spirit if we don't know Jesus personally.**

Notice the fact that these 7 men didn't take Christ into their lives personally. They simply added His name to the repertoire of "magic" in their trade. In other words, they were trying to exploit the moral power of a life in which they had no share. Many people are like that today. They want the benefits and perks that Christianity has to offer, but they don't want the demands of discipleship. They want Jesus to bless them and their children, and they want Christ to help them live their best life ever. But they don't want Him to get in the way. However, you cannot have one without the other. You can't have the blessings without also assuming the responsibilities.

The **second lesson** I want to point out is that our story concludes by relating that many people turned to Christ as a result of this incident, and they gave their lives to God. The result of their conversion was that many of those who believed now openly confessed their evil deeds, and they revealed their secret spells. A number of people who had practiced sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly. The value of the scrolls that were destroyed came to 50,000 drachmas. A drachma was about a day's wage, and so to convert that figure into today's money means that these scrolls were worth about \$4.8 million!

But more important than the sacrifice of these books on the occult was the insight these new Ephesian believers came to realize, and it is this: **when we come to Jesus we have to make a break with the past.**

When I was in college, I experienced a renewal in my faith. I had made a commitment to Christ before when I was in high school, but I was inconsistent in my walk, and I did pretty much whatever I wanted without regard for the teachings of the Bible. Basically, I didn't want Jesus to get in the way of my having fun. However, that freshman year God took hold of my life, and I began to realize some things needed to change in the way I was living. Many of my lifestyle choices weren't honoring to God, and I knew it. So gradually I began to change, and I, like these believers in Ephesus, came to realize that when you come to Jesus you have to make a break with the past. And so I did. And when I did it, I discovered a new freedom, joy, and adventure in choosing to follow Christ and leave the rest behind.

Conclusion.

What is there in your life you need to change? In what ways do you need to make a break with your past? What are you holding onto that you need to let go? Are you dabbling in the occult? Are you in a relationship with someone who isn't your spouse? Are you addicted to pornography? Are you drinking too much? Are you sleeping with your boyfriend, and you know it's wrong? Have you been dishonest in your dealings in business, or are you cheating on your taxes? Do you try to excuse your anger by saying, "That's just the way I am"? Are you neglecting your family by watching too much TV or playing too many video games. It's time to stop these things and make a break with the past. Do it today.

In Lloyd C. Douglas' book, *The Robe*, there's a character named Marcelus who is fascinated with Jesus, and he decides to become Christ's disciple. He writes to a woman he loves back in Rome named Diana about his conversion. She writes back to him these telling words, "What I feared is that it might affect you. It's a beautiful story; let it remain so. We don't have to do anything, do we?"

Oh yes, we do. When we come to Christ, we have to break with the past, and we can't go on living as we have before. Jesus is the sovereign Lord of the universe -- the King of kings and Lord of lords, and we who worship Him do so on bended knee. And He asks us to follow Him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

I want you to take your hands and make a fist. Squeeze your fingers together tightly. Now, close your eyes and I want you to visualize whatever it is your holding onto in your life in your hands. They are things you know aren't honoring to the Lord, and you're holding on to them tightly. Now, slowly begin to open your hands and let go of that thing so that your hands are empty and facing up toward heaven. Release it to the Lord. Give it over to Him. Ask God to grant you freedom from this thing by the power of His Spirit. Make a break with your past. Amen.