

The Bare Essentials (Acts 19:11-20)
Sunday, September 23, 2023
By Mark Archibald

Much thanks to Akua for reading this passage, and to Autumn for providing the illustrations.

Why do you think I chose this passage to talk about today? Well, to be honest, I chose the passage because it is weird. Totally weird. Sometimes we avoid the weirdest parts of Scripture because we find them embarrassing or confusing or they make us ask hard questions about our God and our faith. But I find the weird stories are where I encounter Jesus most vividly. The weird stories are more likely to disrupt my life in all the right ways, showing me a better, more Jesus-centred way to live.

I asked Akua to start reading at a peculiar spot. *God did extraordinary miracles through Paul,¹² so that even handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him were taken to the sick, and their illnesses were cured and the evil spirits left them.* Does that remind you of anything? It reminds me of televangelists! “Send in money and I send you this prayed over healing handkerchief. Support our work (and my bulging bank account) and I’ll send you this anointed water and you will be healed!”

In all the stories of healing or the miraculous in Acts, there’s never any exchange of money. When money is brought up in terms of God’s power, the ability to pay for this power, or receive money for miracles is always criticized or met with terrible results. The healings through aprons and handkerchiefs happen without monetary gain.

In this story of the supernatural, something is being clearly communicated – these instances are **miracles, not magic**. Something we don’t give much attention to in the book of Acts are the many references to magic or sorcery or people involved in magic or sorcery. Because that’s just weird. Is this the Bible, or Harry Potter?

But magic was something believed in and manipulated and seemingly common in the Gentile regions around Israel. The supernatural accounts of healing in the book of Acts are clearly communicated as something other than magic. These are not the result of the mastery or manipulation of the spirit realm. These are not the result of established potions and incantations. This is the work alone of the Holy Spirit. This supernatural stuff is occurring only because of the power and the victory of the resurrected Jesus Christ.

Handkerchiefs and aprons being used to heal people because they were touched by Paul sounds hokey. But they were not evidence of a magical person named Paul. They were evidence of the risen-from-the-dead power of Jesus Christ.

Speaking of magic, the seven sons of Sceva seem to be trying to manipulate the supernatural world themselves. *Some Jews who went around driving out evil spirits tried to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who were demon-possessed. They would say, “In the name of the Jesus whom Paul preaches, I command you to come out.”¹⁴ Seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, were doing this.*

I say the Seven Sons of Sceva manipulate because of how they refer to Jesus. How do they refer to Jesus? What is noteworthy about this? *“In the name of the Jesus whom Paul preaches, I command you to come out.”* They know Paul knows Jesus. But they very clearly don’t know Jesus or have any connection to Jesus. They seem to want to keep Jesus at a distance. They don’t want to know or experience Jesus for themselves – let Paul take care of that. But they certainly want all the power and authority that is associated with Jesus.

Is there a better story than for our current day, especially as it relates to Christianity? There’s a lot of people dropping Jesus’ name because of the access it gives them. There is a lot of political power and influence to be gained by hinting that you have some association with Jesus. There’s billions of dollars to be made by claiming you are affiliated with Jesus and claiming a Christian background. Do you want to make a ton of money at the movie theatre? Make sure your movie has an appeal to Christians and speaks to the trends in Evangelical Christianity. There’s a lot of influence to be had and money to be made by attaching Jesus’ name to something.

As detailed in the story, **Jesus’ name is not a magic word**. People use Jesus’ name to gain power and influence. People use Jesus’ name because they are predators and it gives them access to vulnerable people. People use Jesus’ name for access to wealth.

But this story, and many other like it in the book of Acts, remind us that this attempt to use Jesus to manipulate comes with a heavy, nightmare-ish cost, in this life or the next.

Jesus has real power and real authority in our world. But Jesus’ name is not a magic word to the benefit of you, your reputation or your influence.

¹⁵ *One day the evil spirit answered them, “Jesus I know, and Paul I know about, but who are you?”*

The evil spirit lets the Seven Sons of Sceva know in no uncertain terms, **You have NO authority!** Jesus has credibility with the evil spirit – Jesus is to be feared! Because Paul is deeply tied to and connected with Jesus, he has real authority. Again, it’s not authority claimed by name dropping Jesus. Paul has authority, in worlds seen or unseen, because he has been with Jesus. He has suffered with Jesus. He has suffered for Jesus. He knows Jesus in times of abundance and in times of loss. Paul has a deep, known connection with Jesus, and even the evil spirit knows this to be true.

Jesus is THE authority in the spirit world. Paul has authority because he is genuinely connected to Jesus. The Seven Sons of Sceva have NO authority because they know of Jesus, but have no connection. They want the benefits of Jesus’ name without the allegiance to Jesus.

¹⁶ *Then the man who had the evil spirit jumped on them and overpowered them all. He gave them such a beating that they ran out of the house naked and bleeding.*

¹⁷ *When this became known to the Jews and Greeks living in Ephesus, they were all seized with fear, and the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honor.*

As I’m sure you’re aware, this part of the story is what catches my attention. This is such a violent and

visceral image! Pretend authorities coming into a situation, thinking they have the upper hand, only to be beaten to the point of fleeing the scene naked and bleeding. It's gross, it's grim, it's fascinating.

Of course, the gore and nudity aren't the point. The gore and nudity do reveal people who thought they were "all that" **Completely exposed!** People posing as great authorities and experts are shown for who they really are in humiliating fashion. You don't get to speak for Jesus and act on his behalf while trying to gain things for yourself.

Have I ever encountered a demon? I don't know.

Have I been beat up by a demon and chased out of a room naked? No. (Not yet. But today is a new day!)

But I have been exposed for speaking without authority.

In a lighthearted example, I had been doing children's moments on the spot. People would put something in a shoebox and I wouldn't open the shoebox until it was time for children's moment. A couple of months ago I was given a pooping monkey. It was rubber, and if you squeezed it . . . you know what, the content has been gross enough today. I'll spare you the details.

I began (I thought) quoting the words of Jesus. But I quoted it all wrong. I knew something was up when Anna was looking at me with a weird grin of, "that's not right." And someone was waiting for me with the actual passage of Scripture with the correct verses in hand.

I had the Scripture and teaching of Jesus all inside out and backwards. And while some people said I "made a good point", I was certainly not speaking the words and therefore with the authority of Jesus. Thankfully, there was no blood or nudity involved in the fallout – there was also no running which I appreciated. But it did send me back to the words of Jesus to better learn them, know them and live them.

Like I said, that's more of a silly example. But I know there are worse ones I've done. Any time I've tried to put people in their place by using Jesus words against them, I'm not speaking in the authority or knowledge of Jesus. Any time I speak self-righteously; any time I'm preaching in a way that draws attention to myself instead of Christ, I'm not acting in the authority and knowledge of Jesus. Anytime I have acted in poor ways "on Jesus' behalf" in places of Christian authority; any time I have said cruel things with a shrug and a "well that's what the Bible says" I am not speaking in the knowledge and authority of Jesus. When I have spoken words of condemnation when compassion was needed instead, I am not speaking in the knowledge and authority of Jesus.

That stuff, eventually, all gets exposed. Either it gets confronted directly, or it ends relationships or it has ongoing, hurtful fallout. Thankfully, God is gracious – letting us know where we did something self-serving, forgiving us, encouraging us with a new way forward.

When the seven sons of Sceva were exposed, great fear gripped the region. Bad, poor intending, arrogant actors waving around Jesus' name were exposed, recentring people to get right with Jesus and know Jesus for themselves. They humbly submit to Jesus and his way. This is seen in their final actions.

¹⁸ Many of those who believed now came and openly confessed what they had done. ¹⁹ A number who had practiced sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly. When they calculated the value of the scrolls, the total came to fifty thousand drachmas.^[c] ²⁰ In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power.

From this ugly event there is a significant **Moving ahead**. People turn away from previous habits and practices, and instead move in a brand-new way of giving their lives to the authority of Jesus.

People that had tried to manipulate the spiritual world for their gain, who had invested significant amounts of their lives, money and time into magic and sorcery, get rid of every last trace of what they were involved in. There is no way for them to recover financially from this. There is no way for them to get things back from storage if they change their minds. With their actions they declare there is **No turning back** from this way of Jesus. He is the new authority in their lives, and there are no rivals.

There is nothing quite like the authority of Jesus. We like to associate the authority of Jesus with power and might and influence, and hope to have those qualities in our world around us.

But the authority of Jesus that we witness in the Gospels really wasn't like that. Jesus was listened to and followed because of his authority that was lived. Matthew 7 tells us: ²⁸ *When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching,* ²⁹ *because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law.*

This authority had traction among those who were on the outside of religion because it was lived authority. Not the authority of "I am in charge" but the authority of "I am with you." People lived the experience of Jesus among and with them, especially those that never had anyone with or among them. Jesus authority did not look like dominance – it looked like presence.

The true followers of Jesus, indwelt by God, speak and live with that same authority. Whether they be the apostle Paul or people that you know today.

Our closing song is one that speaks of the authority Jesus had among people in his presence and life with them. It's written by Rich Mullins who died a couple of decades ago. The recording is rough, because he never lived long enough to record this in studio. And some of the language might be considered rough, because the people described in the song are the people who correctly recognized Jesus' presence and authority. They recognized Jesus as God with them.

Is this the Jesus that you associate yourself with? And if so, will you follow his way? Will you give your life to him?