

NOT THE MAGIC KINGDOM

ACTS 19:11-20 OCTOBER

Do you want to “unlock the power of God in your life?” That’s a phrase that is used by some in more charismatic circles, but they’re not the only ones. A simple Google search will show that this is an idea that is tread over a lot out in the Christian world. Here are a few search results titles:

“Unlocking Kingdom power and authority in you.” “Unlock and develop God’s brain power.” “Unlocking our access to Divine power.” “The key to opening the heavens.” “The key to unlock the Holy Spirit’s power in your life.” “Prayer is the way to unlock the power of God.” “Faith is the key to unlock God’s power.” “3 keys you must possess to unlock the power of God.” “5 ways to unleash God’s presence and power.” “7 keys to help you unlock the power of prayer.”¹

These links lead to articles, books, sometimes programs or conferences which make claims and promises to move you into a category of “more.” More power. More manifestations. More tangible experience with the supernatural outpouring of God.

One such annual conference had a promo video in 2019. It wasn’t being held by some heretical church or cult. It was a church we might go to if we lived in that town. The conference billed itself as a special time in God’s presence because it is “in God’s presence” that every good thing starts. And then their list was: “The darkness scatters, cities transformed, nations restored, sons and daughters reconciled. In His presence we encounter MORE.” It then showed a montage of worship concerts and lots of people laying hands on each other.

I don’t list these things to deride the idea of God’s power pouring through God’s people to transform the world. *That’s* why Christ has a Body on the earth. But, so often, what we find is that there is a desire to systematize or synthesize some method, some formula, that promises to generate some wanted result, usually visibly manifested in a feeling or behavior that we label as spiritual.

Here’s the problem: This is not how the Christian life is described in the Bible. It’s not how it’s described and it’s not how it’s demonstrated. We can look at those moments of great outpouring in the Old Testament, where the Shekinah came down at the dedication of the Tabernacle or Temple and say, “There, look: They had a worship service and were going through this holy liturgy and God ‘broke out’.” But, the Church is not Israel.

What about Pentecost? Wasn’t there an outpouring of the Holy Spirit, visibly manifested, during a worshipful prayer gathering? Absolutely. And it happened once again in Acts 4. But, in those moments, we don’t see the Christians working God like a machine. Running through some formula in order to experience a particular feeling or result that they decided upon beforehand.

Now, fast forward to Acts 19, where we find ourselves tonight. We see incredible outpourings of God’s power. We see a city transformed. We see lives changed. Sinners reconciled to God. We see dramatic things happening that astonish everyone who hears about them. How did Paul accomplish this? How did he *unlock* and *unleash* God’s power in Ephesus? The truth is, he *doesn’t!* As Luke tells the story, Paul doesn’t even appear on the stage. He’s mentioned and referenced by some of the *other* characters, but we see no *effort* on his part.

¹ <https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-1-d&q=unlock+the+power+of+God>

In our verses, when some characters *do* take it upon themselves to try to stir up the power of God and accomplish a spiritual purpose, the result is that they get wrecked. They were looking for a particular manifestation of power but, in the end, not only did they not *help* the people they were trying to help, they're worse off themselves.

In the mean time, while they're fooling around with some spiritual chemistry kit, God is busy throughout the city doing extraordinary work. We see in this example that He did not have to be "invited" to come, or coerced or cajoled or conjured to work His magic in Ephesus.

I find this to be a hard issue because, on the one hand, we saw last time that God's desire is for us to live supernaturally empowered lives filled with His everlasting abundance. As a Christian, you have been given Living Water. You've been given supernatural gifts. You've been given the indwelling presence of God the Holy Spirit. That is the present reality for those who have been born again.

But, at the same time, so often we can slip into a pattern of life that feels completely devoid of God's power and presence. Theologically He is always with us, but what about our feelings? This is what leads to all those Google searches and conferences and programs.

What we discover as we study God's word is that there is a difference between living in Christ's power and just *feeling* something we want to feel. Some magical experience that validates us.

This scene in Acts 19 is very helpful and shows not only that God does not need to be conjured, but the dangers of trying to make the spiritual life formulaic.

Acts 19:11-12 - ¹¹ God was performing extraordinary miracles by Paul's hands, ¹² so that even facecloths or aprons that had touched his skin were brought to the sick, and the diseases left them, and the evil spirits came out of them.

You have to chuckle at the opening words: God was performing *extraordinary* miracles. Your translation may say "unusual." Aren't *all* miracles extraordinary? They are, but Luke is making a point here: Something specific and particular was happening in this moment in this city. This happens from time to time in God's history. Think of Peter in Acts 5. There was a period where God was using him to heal people like crazy. Even if his shadow fell across them, they would be made well.

But Peter and Paul weren't "faith healers." There are some who claim that title today. Peter and Paul couldn't just heal people at will, like Superman using x-ray vision. There are multiple times when Paul was *unable* to heal people, even when he *really* wanted them to be made well. We think of his own thorn in the flesh, Timothy's infirm stomach, he left Trophimus sick at Miletus and he was heartbroken at how sick Epaphroditus was, he thought he was going to die.

These guys weren't faith healers. Neither are the people who claim to be today. What does the verse say? *God* was performing the miracles. It was His work and His decision. Why was He doing so?

We can't know the mind of God, but obviously He decided Ephesus *needed* this kind of ministry at the time. This was a city *full* of superstition and magic and occult practices. And the Lord did want to verify and authenticate the message of Paul. He was proving that this representative was true and different from every other wonder-worker in town.

We also see that, sometimes, God likes to square off against the false gods of man. He did so in Egypt. He did so when He sent Elijah to confront the prophets of Baal. God doesn't only play defense, He plays offense too. He went to this pagan swamp and planted His flag there.

There's *no* suggestion that these miracles were Paul's idea or his method to get people's attention. In fact, we simply see him lecturing in classes and then, it seems, working up a sweat, probably tent making. He is most definitely *not* selling his rags to turn a profit. If you get some offer to buy a prayer rug or some other item that is supposedly blessed by some faith healer, save your money. What we're seeing here was unusual, even by miraculous standards.

There is an important subplot that runs through many stories in the Bible that I like to bring out when we can. And that's that God can use *anything* for His glory and His eternal work. Your words, your home, your singing, your countenance. Even your old dish rags or shoebox if His plan permits.

Now, we tend to identify something that we think God should do in our city or to address some problem and then we try to convince Him to do it. Paul's not doing that. No, it pleased God to bring this little revival to Ephesus and Paul was simply willing to participate in submission and faithfulness.

Here's what happens when we make it our business to plan God's work for Him.

Acts 19:13-14 - ¹³Now some of the itinerant Jewish exorcists also attempted to pronounce the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, "I command you by the Jesus that Paul preaches!" ¹⁴Seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish high priest, were doing this.

These aren't Christians. They're Jews who were sons of a priest. Not a high priest in the official sense. Scholars think they were either sons of one of the chief priests who led one of the 24 courses or priests, or they were just *saying* they were sons of a high priest for street cred.

Why are *they* in Ephesus? Well, they were vagabonds. This was their job. They would go from place to place, like Doc Terminus in the old *Pete's Dragon*, getting paid to work their magic and then move on. In contrast, why was *Paul* in Ephesus? He was there by the leading and permission of the Holy Spirit. Let that be a warning to us individually as we think about how we serve God and to Christians involved in church planting efforts.

These guys were using a formula, incantation approach to their ministry. That was the prevailing method in that region at that time. What's our secret sauce today? Sometimes it's 'data' or methods that convert to certain behaviors or phenomena. These sons of Sceva were marrying practices from the world into their spiritual lives, hoping for a tangible result. Rather than believing and submitting to Christ and receiving the Holy Spirit, they were simply trying to harness His power for their own purposes. And, if you think about it, this is a *terrible* compromise on their part. They're supposed to be priestly Jews, and here they're invoking a man who is seen as a false messiah!

Let's see how it goes.

Acts 19:15-16 - ¹⁵The evil spirit answered them, "I know Jesus, and I recognize Paul—but who are you?" ¹⁶Then the man who had the evil spirit jumped on them, overpowered them all, and prevailed against them, so that they ran out of that house naked and wounded.

These men had no authority because they didn't represent Jesus. If someone came to your front door and shouted, "Come out with your hands up!" and you could see that they weren't a cop, there'd be no need for you to come out. In fact, you'd probably arm yourself for an altercation. That's exactly what happens here. Looking back on it, it's somewhat comical to us, but this does highlight a very important principle for the real world: There are real problems out there, people whose lives are being ruined by sin while they're held captive by the devil. If we want to bring *true* solutions to a life or a city or a nation, only *real* Christianity is going to make the difference. Not formulas or half measures or things that just *feel* spiritual. We need the actual work of God. Not swaggering out in pride and presumption and sprinkles of paganism like these guys.

The good news is that God is so powerful and so gracious, He is able to accomplish the impossible in the most ruined of places, through just 1 person if necessary. Look at Joseph or Nehemiah or Daniel. Look at the revivals of history. These stories don't start with formulas or men devising a plan. They begin with people who *know* God and believe Him and choose to *follow* His leading.

Acts 19:17 - ¹⁷When this became known to everyone who lived in Ephesus, both Jews and Greeks, they became afraid, and the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high esteem.

When Luke gives a vitals report of the work of God he does not elevate experience or wonders over the glory of God or the spread of His word. For the individual man in this story, it would've been really great for him to no longer be demon possessed. But that wasn't the *end* goal. Without a permanent intervention in the form of salvation the exorcised demons might just come back, this time with a few of friends in tow. But now we see the fear of God starting to grip the hearts of the people of Ephesus. And *that* is a very good thing because it leads to life change.

Acts 19:18-20 - ¹⁸And many who had become believers came confessing and disclosing their practices, ¹⁹while many of those who had practiced magic collected their books and burned them in front of everyone. So they calculated their value and found it to be fifty thousand pieces of silver. ²⁰In this way the word of the Lord spread and prevailed.

They came together, not to experience manifestations or emotionalism. They came to *get rid* of their obsession with those sort of things. Book burning is not generally a good thing, but this is one we could get behind. Instead of gathering as a church and saying, "We want to *feel* a tangible manifestation that makes us feel like something supernatural happened," they said, "We want to have a tangible demonstration of our repentance!" As the Bible promises, the fear of the Lord was the *beginning* of wisdom. As they learned more about what it means to be a Christian and learned more about the word of God and how it directs us, they realized, "Oh wow, I need to get rid of this book." They *believed* God and what He said about certain practices.

It's silly to say, but God has opinions. He has stances on things. He has made decisions about what is good for you and what is not good for you, what is glorifying to Him and what is outside the boundaries of your relationship with Him. We need to agree with those opinions. This is why it matters when God's people disagree over Biblical prohibitions. *God's word* has to prevail and be the authority. When someone comes along and says, "It's not ok for you to *not* observe the Sabbath," we can say, under the authority of Scripture, that they're wrong. We *don't* have to observe the Sabbath because God has dismantled that regulation. Rather, it was never for the Church. But, when people come along and say, "The Bible has antiquated and bigoted views on sexuality, we no longer need to go along with what it says," we can authoritatively say, "No, *you're* wrong. That boundary still exists." The issues aren't always simple, but they are discoverable as we ingest God's word and

study it and allow it to prevail in us. As we *personally* submit to it and say, in our own lives, “I need to burn this book of magic because it is in contention with the teaching and leading of my God.”

Those acts of obedience can be hard and costly. Scholars argue over how much money this was worth, but they agree that 1 silver piece was a day’s wage. Meaning 50,000 days of labor. If we took the average American income, that’d be somewhere north of \$8,000,000. That’s a costly repentance. Of course, they were making out ahead in the end. In Paul’s letter to these Ephesians he talks again and again about the *riches* they received in Christ. About 8 times he speaks to them about the endless treasures of God’s kindness and grace and our rich and glorious inheritance in Him.

Amazing things were happening in Ephesus. But they weren’t by man’s design. They weren’t man’s idea. Paul, for his part, is completely passive in these verses. And yet we see the power of God shaking this town up in a remarkable way. As it was happening, we see these believers coming, not to generate some experience. They’re making it a point to *separate* themselves from magical mysticism and instead embrace the word of God and have it rule over their everyday lives.

The problem is, we *want* to see God bring revival. We *want* God to dramatically transform lives, even work wonders. We want to enjoy the kind of relationship with the Lord that we see in people like Paul or Jonathan Edwards or A.W. Tozer or so many other examples. And we want to *feel* spiritually invigorated.

Those are all good desires. And God *does* still work in powerful and miraculous ways at certain times and in certain places, but it’s according to *His* design, not ours. So, how do we *unlock* the power of God in our lives or in Hanford? First of all, He doesn’t deadbolt the door. The veil is torn. Paul would say, more than once, in his Ephesian letter, “you have access to God *right now*.”

So, what about the power? Paul said that as we trust Christ He will make His home in our hearts and then *He* will empower us with inner strength through the Holy Spirit by His own glorious, unlimited resources.² The question is not what we *do* to convince God to ‘break out’ in our midst. The question is: Do we trust the Lord? Do we *believe* what He says in His word? “Yes I do, so *I should see the following manifestations of miraculous power...*” That isn’t how it works. That’s not what we see in the New Testament. “But I want to *feel* it.”

God’s word says you *have* received power. He’s given it to you. Our walk with God *is* supernatural. You *are* supernaturally gifted as a Christian. You’re part of the impossible, eternal work of God on the earth. But the when, how and look of it is God’s business. Our part is to trust, obey and be led.

² Ephesians 3:16-17