March 10, 2019

Acts 19:1-20

Rob Conti

Hello everybody. Go ahead and open your Bibles to Acts 1. That’s not a joke. Somebody asked a question last week and we realized that we have not covered Acts thoroughly enough so we’re taking it from the top. That is a joke. But I wanted to read the first eight verses because it’s so important to remember where this started and where it’s going. We see it throughout the book of Acts—it opens with the promise of Pentecost and then it happens, and then all the way through the book we see these echos of what takes place at the beginning. It’s going to happen again in our text tonight. In chapter 19, we see an echo of Pentecost and it’s for a very specific purpose. So, I want to start by refreshing our minds to how the book opens.

I’ll start in verse 1,

In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, 2 until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. 3 He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.

4 And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, “you heard from me; 5 for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

6 So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” 7 He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. 8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

That’s our Lord’s last words before He ascends to Heaven. He gives us this command, and this promise, and this assurance. How awesome is this that it’s not in a question but he’s saying that this is what you will do. This is going to happen. The Gospel cannot fail. The Gospel can’t fail. It’s going to go forward. It went through Jerusalem. We saw that in the first seven chapters of Acts. The first seven chapters of Acts describe the Gospel infiltrating Jerusalem as these first disciples proclaim the Word of God. The Holy Spirit came upon them and they spoke in unlearned languages. Remember that? They spoke in languages they never learned and people heard the Gospel in their own tongues and received it. Then, in chapters 8-12, we saw the Gospel go through Judea and Samaria. And from chapter 13 and on to the end of the book, we see it going to the end of the Earth. In their minds, that’s Rome. But we know we are not there yet. We are not to the end of the Earth for them yet. But we know that the way that the book of Acts closes that it doesn’t really end, does it. In fact, I’d say it’s open-ended. Why? Because it’s not finished. That’s why we are here. We’re in this story. This is our story. The Acts continue—the acts of the Church continue. We are still taking the Gospel. Every generation, no matter where the Church finds itself or when the Church finds itself, we are taking the Gospel to the end of the world, to our own Jerusalem, our own town, our own city, and then out as far as we can reach with the resources and the people that the Lord gives us and the strength that He gives us, by the same power, the power of His Holy Spirit.

So, turn over to Acts 19. I’ll start in verse 1,

And it happened that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the inland country and came to Ephesus. There he found some disciples. 2 And he said to them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” And they said, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.” 3 And he said, “Into what then were you baptized?” They said, “Into John's baptism.” 4 And Paul said, “John baptized with the baptism of repentance,…

Do you hear the echoes? Do you hear the echoes from Acts 1?

“John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus.” 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. 7 There were about twelve men in all.

8 And he entered the synagogue and for three months spoke boldly, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God. 9 But when some became stubborn and continued in unbelief, speaking evil of the Way before the congregation, he withdrew from them and took the disciples with him, reasoning daily in the hall of Tyrannus. 10 This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.

So, we hear this echo again; decisive movement of the missionary work of the Gospel going to new places, as it’s gone from the Jews, to the Samaritans, to God-fearers, to Gentiles, and now, as Ephesus is about to become the new hub of all mission work, and we see the echo of Pentecost and the power of the Holy Spirit poured out. There is so much in what I just read that it’s easy to get hung up on the parts that Luke doesn’t tell us. I’ll be the first to admit that as a student of the Bible and as somebody who gets the opportunity to preach the Bible that the gaps in this will drive you crazy with speculation. It’s not bad to do, in fact, I think it’s fun to think through all the possibilities. Like, when he says they are disciples does he just mean that they are disciples of John, because they don’t seem to know about Jesus yet, right? How much did they know? Were they already saved or are they not saved until they’re baptized and the Holy Spirit comes upon them? There are all these questions that we don’t necessarily get the answer to and I think that we could get caught up in that and miss Luke’s big point, the big idea, his main point of the whole passage that we’re going to look at. He’s got a big theological point in his mind that he doesn’t want us to miss, in fact he keeps coming back to it over, and over, and over again through the book of Acts. It’s here in verse 20 at the end of our passage for tonight. He says it. He gives us our main point crystal clear. Look at what he says. This is where this is all driving to tonight.

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

What’s happening? The Gospel continues to keep moving into new areas. It’s not so much about the new geography as it is new peoples, because this has always been God’s plan from the beginning, from before our first parents bit into the lie that they could be their own god. What brought the Fall, what brought the curse, what brought the need for salvation for all of us is that our first parents bit into the lie that they could be their own god. We, together, represented by our first parents, bit into the lie that we could determine what’s true and what’s false, what’s right and what’s wrong, and that lie poisoned us. That sin brought death and it spread to all of us. We bit into that lie. But even before that, it was always God’s plan to redeem a people and it would be a people from every tribe and every tongue; not one ethnicity, not one special people out of all the peoples of the Earth, but all the peoples of the Earth, represented ultimately when His kingdom does come. When that moment happens, when we are all together in the kingdom of God, people from every tribe, every tongue will be around the throne worshipping Jesus. That was always God’s plan and that’s what Luke is pointing back to. This is why this happens. It’s fascinating that these people, these disciples… Paul gets to Ephesus and, no doubt, we will see in a second that he went to the synagogue as he always does and these guys are there. They know of John the Baptist and they were baptized by John so they are looking for the Messiah, but it would seem that they don’t even know that it’s Jesus. He explains to them that it’s Jesus and, no doubt, he then preaches the Gospel of Jesus. As we know, this is Paul we are talking about, and in 1 Corinthians 15:3 he says this,

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that He was buried, and He was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.

For Paul, this was always primary. This was of first importance. What? To preach the Gospel, to tell people who Jesus is and what He’s accomplished in His life that was sinless, His death that was sacrificial, and in His resurrection that was absolutely victorious over sin, over death, absorbing completely the wrath of God that you and I deserve in our place. He was always going to preach that. He was going to show how this was what God had always planned on. Look at it. It’s in the Old Testament. He would teach it according to the Scriptures. So, no doubt, that’s what he explains to these men and on hearing it they believe, and they are baptized, and they received the Holy Spirit. And these guys become the beginning of a whole new extension of a harvest of souls starting in Ephesus and then reaching out to the cities. We are going to see the platforms that Paul uses here.

So, what does this mean for us? Let’s pause and, before we move on, what do we take from this? Because this is where people get tripped up and ask what it looks like and, “How much of the Holy Spirit did you get when you were saved, and are their miracles to evidence that, and is that necessary to prove your salvation?” and then we miss the mark, we miss the main point. For us, when we hear these stories and when we see this is Scripture it should remind us, because we’ve seen it all the way through Acts, all the way through this book, that the believers go out and they open their mouths in the face of persecution and in the face of people gladly hearing what they have to say. They depend completely on the Holy Spirit to give the increase. We can’t forget that.

This is a quote by David Platt. He said this,

What if the greatest hindrance to the work of the Gospel among the lost in our community is not their addictions, not their sexual immorality, not their arrogant indifference to the Gospel, but rather the attempt of the Church of God to do the work of God apart from the power of the Spirit of God?

What if that’s the big hindrance in our communities? That’s challenging. I didn’t like reading it and thinking about it, so I wanted to share it with you. It’s hard, isn’t it? But it’s so good to pause and come back here and say, “That’s right. We need to remember. We need to evaluate. Are we doing things and is our ministry personally and then collectively…could it be done by those who are not indwelt by the Holy Spirit? Would it bear the same fruit?” It’s challenging this week to look at this in a fresh light and cry out to the Lord, “I confess that I desperately need you. I desperately need the power of your Spirit to minister the Gospel to the people that you allow me to come across. I desperately need the power of your Spirit, your empowering, to stand up and proclaim your Word; to have a neighbor come over and to be able to share the Gospel; to cross the street and to be faithful at work.” We need the Spirit of God to make Pinwheel more…if it’s just a tutoring program it’s awesome, it’s a good thing. It’s nothing to be ashamed of if all we are doing is helping these students in their education but how much more, when empowered by the Holy Spirit you sit down with that child and you open *The Jesus Storybook Bible* or the *Action Bible* and you speak life into them? Speak life into them. I hope the tutoring helps them in their education and makes a difference in the person they grow into, but who are they going to be for all of eternity? Empowered by the Holy Spirit, for you to sit down with that student makes all the difference in the world—all the difference for all of eternity. We desperately need the Spirit of God and we need to be reminded of that.

It’s easy, when we read through this, and rightfully so because it’s God’s design, His Bible—it follows Peter and then Paul, Apostles, super-Christians, right? They’re healing people, they’re casting out demons, they’re being beaten, and rejoicing. They are doing all these amazing things and it’s easy to lose sight of – they are doing all of this amazing stuff in this unique calling that leaves us an example to follow in our ordinary lives. Sometimes when I read these stories I can’t help but to think of when it talks about them planting these churches with these bodies of believers. I think, not all of them are Apostles. We know that. Not all of them are missionaries. We know that. There are ordinary Christians in these bodies that are empowered by the Holy Spirit and who are meeting together to encourage one another, who are going to work, getting up early, working hard, being faithful with the Gospel, with the people they’re around, going home, loving their families well, encouraging other believers, and doing it all over the next day. And their names are not written in the Bible, we don’t know of them, but right now they are in Heaven worshipping Jesus alongside the heroes of the Bible. They’re just being ordinary Christians. I think, yeah, because the ordinary Christian life is a life empowered by the Holy Spirit. We can’t lose sight of that. We need to pursue that hard. We pursue that by surrendering ourselves daily. For specific tasks? Yes, absolutely, but daily. Every day we need this. My mind goes to Colossians 3. We recently looked at Colossians in our discipleship group. We need to set our minds on the things above not the things of Earth, that we would seek first the kingdom of Heaven. Right? That we would allow the Word of Christ to dwell in us richly. That we would pray and seek the Lord in prayer and that we would fellowship together and do everything we know to simply surrender ourselves to the Spirit of God in our lives.

Verse 8,

And he entered the synagogue and for three months spoke boldly, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God. 9 But when some became stubborn and continued in unbelief, speaking evil of the Way before the congregation, he withdrew from them and took the disciples with him, reasoning daily in the hall of Tyrannus. 10 This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.

So, we know it was Paul’s habit when he would go to a new city to go to the synagogue and start there, to go the Jews first and then to the Greeks, to the Gentiles. So, he goes in and he actually has a pretty long run for him in the synagogue. Three months—he was doing good. Usually, the hostility hit a boiling point before then. It comes, and Paul using some wisdom and some discernment thinks, “We’re about a day or two from rocks being thrown. I’m going to go ahead and rent the hall.” He goes ahead and moves out and he takes these disciples with him. It says that he boldly—boldly—reasoned and persuaded them concerning the kingdom of God. I think, right off the bat, that there is such good application for us. Boldly—for him and his context—boldly. Paul knew –this wasn’t his first rodeo. He had been beaten. He had had rocks thrown at him. He’d been lied about, and cursed, and called a heretic and everything else. For him to go there was bold. Let’s not confuse boldness with being harsh or obnoxious. He was just lovingly bold and clear, steadfast, unapologetic in his proclamation of Jesus. He went and reasoned with them. He was able to show them from their Scriptures how Jesus was and is the Messiah, unafraid of their questions, their challenging. He could defend the faith and be persuasive.

I think that this is what carried over when he was preaching in this rented facility in town to Gentiles as they would come. It’s an awesome picture where Paul, in the morning is going to work. He’s getting up and he’s going to work. He doesn’t take money from anybody; he just goes and he makes tents all morning long. But in Ephesus, about 11:00 or 12:00, it was siesta time, which I think is awesome. This is my home, I’m going to my people, I’m comfortable in our culture, but why when we started this whole thing, why in the world did we not bring siestas with us? In all the stuff that we did, how did that get dropped? Who in the world—some over-achieving type-A personality—said let’s do away with naptime? How in the world did we not rebel against that? One day I’ll get back to that. But, anyway, Paul would work all morning and then in the hottest part of the day everyone would kind of knock off. So, in the morning, there was potentially somebody who was already lecturing in the hall and then in the afternoon hours the hall would be open and Paul either rented it or maybe the guy was a believer and he let him use it. Whatever the case, Paul went in there every day for two years and proclaimed the Gospel boldly and people would come. You’ve got to remember that Ephesus—as we looked at last week—people came from all over to Ephesus. Remember the Temple of Diana is there and it’s one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. People came from all over to visit Ephesus and no doubt they would hear of this man proclaiming this new religion, talking about a man who rose from the dead, and the philosophers, and the traders, and the common man would go in to hear, and to debate, and to listen, and to learn, and to challenge. And Paul and his boys would go in there and boldly proclaim the Gospel, unapologetically, reasoning with them.

The word “reasoning” here has more of an apologetic tone. It reminds me of 1 Peter 3:15, when Peter said,

But in your hearts, honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for the reason for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and respect.

Right? Give a defense without being defensive. Right? You know right away when someone knows they’re wrong. They get defensive. When you know the truth and the truth has set you free you don’t have to be defensive about it. That’s what Paul is calling us to do. What’s the example here? What should we be? You and I are probably not ever going to have the platform that Paul had. We don’t have that platform, but what platform has the Lord given you? It’s a good question to ask yourself, right? What are the platforms the Lord has given you for the Gospel? What’s your synagogue? What’s the hall for you? Your family? Oftentimes that’s the hardest. People who know you the best and the emotions are tightest. Friends? Work? School? Mission trips? Whatever those platforms are, we need to be bold, unapologetic, and clearly communicate the Gospel, and be ready to give an answer. The idea is being able to just logically walk through why we believe what we believe. Are there things that are going to be hard for an unbelieving mind? Yeah. We can’t explain everything we believe but there is good reason for it. We have the authority of the Word of God to stand on. We don’t ever have to apologize for it. In fact, we know at the end of the day that it’s not in our ability to give a defense that will take somebody from the kingdom of darkness and transfer them into the kingdom of God’s beloved Son. It is the power of the Word of God. That’s where the power lies to transform minds and souls. But we need to be prepared to give an answer for what we believe, to be able to walk through Scripture and explain to somebody who Jesus is, and what He did, and why that matters, to explain to them their desperate need. Because he says it should be persuasive, right? He persuaded people. He didn’t leave it up in the air like, “Maybe you should try Jesus.”

I read something on Twitter either this morning or yesterday where this guy said that his Sunday School teacher told him, “If it’s wrong then at least maybe there’s a chance it’s right.” He was like, “What?” We know that’s not what the Scripture teaches about the Gospel—that maybe it’s right. The Scriptures say, “If this isn’t legit then we are of all people the most to be pitied, because then we’re missing out on the ‘eat, drink, and be merry because tomorrow we die’ part.” We’ve decided that there’s so much more to life than ‘eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we die.’ We know, we have the Gospel, we have the hope, not just for ourselves but for the world—the Hope of the world—in eternity, when Jesus says, “No, no, no—that’s passing away, but here in my kingdom there is pleasure and joy forever. Come in. Come in. Those of you who belong to me, come in and enjoy the kingdom of God. Share in my glory where there is no more pain, no more sorrow, where I will wipe away your tears, and death will be no more. Come and enjoy.” That’s what we live for and we have that hope so we share that hope. We should be persuasive with it, to call people to that hope and be persuasive in warning people of the wrath to come. That’s not a fun thing to say. Paul didn’t preach the Gospel because it got him rich. And real preachers of the Gospel don’t preach it to get rich. Amen? Amen. We’re doing alright. We don’t do it to get rich. Why? Because it’s offensive to people. We know it. We know the world is not going to like our message but we know it’s their only hope to escape the wrath to come. Jesus said, the Bible says, that God has appointed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness—His standard, not ours. He will judge the world in righteousness and He proved it by raising Jesus from the dead. He’s going to judge the world so we should persuade people. There is wrath coming. There is judgment. It’s not that you close your eyes one day and drift off into death and it’s over. The reality of God’s judgment, if we are honest with ourselves, is too horrible to even think about. As a Christian, it’s too horrible to think about. It’s horrible to think about. I don’t get it when Christians joke about Hell. I don’t get it. I don’t get for one moment that we could think that is funny at all. If we love anybody in this world, how could we joke about something like that? How can we take it lightly? And in the same vein, if we truly believe this and we care about anybody who is breathing, then how in the world do we not open our mouths and say, “I love you. I love you. But I need you to know that God has appointed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness, and we are not righteous. We’re sinful, every one of us. I deserve Hell, I deserve wrath, and my only hope is Jesus. It’s Jesus.” And then to be persuasive in showing them the beauty of Jesus. I’m not trying to scare people into Heaven; I’m trying to prepare their hearts to see the depth and the beauty of the love of God on display in the person and work of Jesus. It’s only when we see God as holy, and righteous, and just, and on the verge of pouring out His wrath that we understand how much He must love us that He, himself, humbled himself, became one of us, to absorb that wrath in our place. That’s who Jesus is. He’s the same God whose Hell we deserve, who came to take that Hell for us. He loves us. He loves us and He wants to not pour out not His wrath but His grace and His mercy for all of eternity. It’s beautiful. The Gospel is beautiful. God’s love is deeper and richer than we can possibly even comprehend as we are experiencing it. So be persuasive and show people the love of God in Christ Jesus. We’ve got to open our mouths, we’ve got to be bold, we’ve got to take advantage of the platforms that He gives us. Paul did. He did it for two years and we see that most scholars and commentators believe that in the first chapters of Revelation, where we see the seven churches—it leads off with the church at Ephesus and he walks through all these churches that he has these messages for—they believe this is probably when those churches were established. Paul made Ephesus his home base and he proclaimed the Gospel, and as believers were discipled and were sent out to plant a church in Ephesus and then in the surrounding cities. And people would come and go and then go back to their city and have a church to be a part of.

I want to say one more thing before we move on from this section about boldness because I think this is where we get tripped up a lot of times. We play games in our own minds. I called Paul a super-Christian earlier, right? It’s so encouraging because in Scripture we see Paul, when he’s writing these letters, inspired by the Holy Spirit of God, asking the churches to pray for him. Let those come back to your mind and roll back to your mind, all those places in Scripture where Paul is asking for prayer. What does he ask for? He says, “Pray for me. Pray that I’ll be bold.” Let me read it to you from Ephesians, from the letter that he wrote to this church.

Ephesians 6:18-20,

“Praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, 19 and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, 20 for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak.

That encourages me. If he’s asking for boldness, what was he feeling in his heart and mind? The same thing you and I do, right? Fear, inadequacies, and insecurities; uncertain of how people would respond. Things that maybe you and I don’t think about, like, “Are they going to throw rocks at my head again?” So, what did he do? He prayed and he asked for prayer. That encourages me, that we can do that for one another. Right? We can do that tonight, and in our discipleship groups, and throughout the week. Pray for yourself and for this body that we would be bold and that we would share the Gospel clearly and boldly as we ought to speak.

Alright, you guys have to listen a little bit faster, okay?

Verse 11,

And God was doing extraordinary miracles…

Extra supernatural things…

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.

This is crazy, right? Picture it in your mind. In the mornings, what is Paul doing? He’s making tents. He’s sweating, and working, and they are taking his sweat rag and his apron to sick people and God is healing them. And right there, what Luke says is that God by the hand of Paul did even crazier than normal miracles, and the emphasis is that God did this. We’ve got to remember that Ephesus is a hub because of its spirituality, its religion. It is steeped and saturated in witchcraft, and the occult, and demonic activity. If you get a book on ancient Greek mythology and it looks nice and interesting, you’re like, “Oh, this is where they got the idea for comic books.” But it glosses over the dark, dark demonic side of this religion, and what was happening in those temples, and the types of sacrifices being made and the demonic activity that went along with it, and Ephesus was saturated with it. It was a spiritual stronghold for the enemy. What Luke just did was set the stage and God, by the hand of His servant, is doing miraculous miracles and setting people free, and healing their bodies and setting their souls free from demonic influence; things that only God can do. And he’s setting up this contrast for us, this contrast of what they were able to do by their demonic spells with what God does. Because for them, their whole religion was built on manipulating the gods and getting the gods to do for them what they wanted them to do. So, you have to figure out what the gods like, do what they like, and that would motivate them to serve you. It’s this perverted, twisted, back-and-forth manipulations between man and these demonic forces. What is going to become clear is that is not how Yahweh operates. God is not manipulated and He is not wielded. In fact, what we see is God wielding His servant to free people, not to further enslave them.

So, for us, on the surface it’s a pretty funny story. To me, when I just read it, this is a pretty funny story. These guys go in and they have their practice but they’ve seen what Paul is doing and they’re like, “I’ll just mix a little Jesus into my spells,” and it doesn’t go so well, right? It’s the ultimate humiliation, I would imagine. I don’t know from experience but I would imagine that it’s really humiliating to run away from a fight where you outnumbered them seven to one, and you’re now naked, bleeding, and running away screaming. To us, there’s a note of humor in it but it’s because we don’t know the culture that they were living in. This man was oppressed. This man was possessed, right? And what they see is a power that they didn’t have the strength to overcome. These things can only be overcome by the name of Jesus and not on our terms, not in our ability to manipulate that name, not in a human’s ability to wield the name of Jesus, but by simply surrendering to Jesus. That is the only way to come under the power of God—to surrender to the name of Jesus. That’s what happens.

Look at the next verses,

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.

They’re set free as they surrender to the authority, to the power, of the name of Jesus. What I want to say is that this isn’t just a story for 2000 years ago. It’s not just a story for 2000 years ago. God is still doing this today. It doesn’t always look the same as God rescues people from the slavery of their sin. That doesn’t always look the same. That might look like somebody being totally overcome by an addiction or it may mean somebody who just in their own mind has spent their life subduing and rejecting the truth of Scripture and living a life that on the surface looks very successful. God rescues somebody from that only by His power. This is still going on.

Recently, Gar received a video from JJ Alderman, whom a lot of you have met, who is a missionary in Togo, Africa. Y’all know that is where the Bozemans are preparing to go, right? Gar and Kimberly are preparing their family to go to Togo to minister to the people there and to plant churches. So, he recently received a video of this happening. What is happening in our text tonight is happening right now just on the other side of the world. So, I’ve asked Gar to come up. We’ve never done a tag team preaching before so for the first time ever at Red Oak I’m going to tag out and Gar is going to come up and explain what’s happening in Togo and finish out our text for us.

(Gar Bozeman)

What we have to ask ourselves now is does the power of the Spirit to move—does the Spirit prevailing in the book of Acts—still prevail today in the same way. Before I show this video of our brothers and sisters in West Africa burning these idols, we need to have a context for that. We need to understand what this truly means because it’s easy for us to see some pagan believers burning an object and we go, “Oh, that’s great,” and then we kind of move on. But I want you guys for a minute to step back out of our western culture and to put yourselves in the shoes of these people. Understand what this entirely means. Because this isn’t just an object that someone puts in their home and they pray to and that’s all it ever was. To put yourself in their shoes, understand this. When you’re born into this culture, when you’re born into the culture of these tribes in Togo and Benin, whenever you’re born you’re not christened like we would christen a baby in some churches in America. You’re consecrated to the demons of your family. You’re consecrated to the demons of your ancestors. And then, as you become a child, the witch doctors in the family will gather around and they will invoke the spirits to come on you. They will invoke demons on you and these demons are meant to inhabit you, to protect you, and give you security in exchange for your worship and your sacrifices. Your family no longer celebrates your birthday like we would celebrate your birthday but they celebrate the day that you were first possessed by a demon and the day that you were first possessed becomes your new birthday. Understand how controlling and how dark and demonic this is. So, when you see these people in this video that we’re about to watch they are not burning an object; they’re renouncing their identity. They are completely abandoning everything that it has meant to be identified with their family, their culture. This is the radical turn that Christ requires. Roll the video.

---

Amen. That’s good isn’t it? That song they were singing at the end—I asked JJ what they were singing and it’s tribal language. It’s not even French, not that my French is good enough to understand it anyway. I asked JJ what that song is about and he said they are celebrating the power and the sovereignty of God. They’re celebrating His power over dominion. He takes control over the darkness. Those things that have controlled them, those things that they have identified with, no longer have a hold on them because God has entered in and His Spirit prevails mightily over them.

As Kimberly and I were there, we went to the city of Ouidah where they worship pythons. Their faces are scarred. They have two scars on their forehead and two scars on their chin and three on each cheek. They have ten scars to represent the ten marks on the python’s face. Kimberly asked if they really believe that the scars are beautiful. They said it’s not the scars that are beautiful to them but it’s what the scars represent, because in this culture beauty is only determined by who you belong to. The scars are beautiful because the scars represent that you belong to something or someone.

Right now, in our community and even in our church, we have people who are carrying the scars of identity with addiction. They’re caring the scars of sexual relationships, and they are carrying the scars of people-pleasing, and materialism, and all the things that they’ve identified with. If you’re here tonight and that’s how you’ve identified, we want to let you know that you can come under the covering of a God who it pleased Him to crush His Son so that His enemies could be transferred from a kingdom of darkness into a kingdom of light. Your beauty and worth can be found in the infinite value of Jesus.

My question to us as a body of believers, to Red Oak, is that if you looked around and this church came to an end and all we had was the people, if Red Oak was just the body of believers, if we didn’t have a building, if we didn’t have Pinwheel, and we didn’t have programs, no elders, no music, and we started from the ground up, we started from a foundation, what would we do first? Would we pool our money together to build a new building? Would we invest in comforts? Would we invest in entertainment? If we truly believe that billions of people are dying without the knowledge of Jesus, what would we do? If we truly believe what the Scripture says about how the Spirit moves in the body of Christ, would we limit ministry to a select few of elders or would we realize that the body of Christ, everyone who has been adopted into the family of Christ, has been empowered by the Spirit of God for ministry. It’s not just those specially gifted ministers that bear the responsibility but that we all, as the body of Christ, carry the Spirit of God. When we hear things like, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few,” what do we focus on more? Are we discouraged that the workers are few and sit back and go, “But God, the harvest is plentiful.” Is that how I see my community? Do I look around and go, “The harvest…the harvest is white”?

As the band comes up and gets ready to do music, the realization here is that the spread of the Gospel took place by ordinary believers who were extraordinarily empowered by the Spirit of God and they simply preached the Gospel everywhere they went. So, my prayer for us as a body of Christ is that we are not a kingdom that’s built around a building. We’re not a kingdom that’s built around a program or even its fallible leaders. We’re not built around the things that the world says church is defined as. I pray that we more identify as the ordinary people of God with the extraordinary power of the Holy Spirit inside of us that proclaim the Gospel everywhere and that we trust the Holy Spirit to do the work. We don’t see the Holy Spirit as something that we attach to ourselves to carry around and to wield but we understand that the Holy Spirit wields us and we are instruments in His hand. If we are faithful to proclaim, the Gospel advances and the kingdom of God advances and prevails mightily.

Let me pray.

Father, we thank you for your Word. We thank you for the picture that we have in Scripture. We’re thankful for the fact that you choose to use us and that the Gospel advances today, not through just key leaders, but Lord, through the anonymous believers that are spread throughout the world and who are faithful in persecution and are faithful in affliction, and faithful in imprisonment. And Lord that we would look at our homes and our communities and we would see, Lord, that the harvest is plentiful and that our hearts would be burdened for those people so much that we would desire above our need to be accepted and above anything that we place our value in that they would come to know you, that they would have knowledge of who you are. Father, I pray that we would be bold like this and that we would be faithful to go and that we would step forward and be engaged in your kingdom’s work, and Lord that we would have the opportunity to see your Spirit move in ways that we never imagined possible. We love you and praise you. In Jesus’ name, Amen.