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The Work of the Church Part 1

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Acts 19:1-10 (ESV)

And it happened that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the inland country and came to Ephesus. There he found some disciples. 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." And he said, "Into what then were you baptized?" They said, "Into John's baptism." And Paul said, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus." On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking in tongues and prophesying. There were about twelve men in all.

And he entered the synagogue and for three months spoke boldly, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God. 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. This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.

Mark 1:14-20

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."

Passing alongside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men." And immediately they left their nets and followed him. And going on a little farther, he saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, who were in their boat mending the nets. And immediately he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants and followed him.

We're continuing in our series on Acts. We've entitled it *Unstoppable*. Acts is, of course, a small book in the New Testament, right after Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and it gives account of the birth of the church and then the forward expansion of the church from Jerusalem forward, back just after the time of Jesus.

And it is the church that we are talking about today—the church that all believers in the world today are still a part of. And this church would continue to grow until the end of the age. Jesus said it is unstoppable. The gates of hell will not stand against it. And that's why we've entitled this series *Unstoppable*, because Jesus is building His church in the hearts of men and women down through history, and nothing is going to thwart it. He's going to bring it to its culmination at the end of the age.

Time is linear, history is linear. It had a beginning. This age will have an end, and we will step into a new age. In the middle of that, we're living right now in this epoch—this era of history—where the church is growing. God is being patient with the world. He is waiting for His appointed time, when all that has been accomplished, that He is setting forth to accomplish through His church, comes to its culmination.

The larger picture is this: human beings were created in the image of God and placed here on this earth, like the whole creation, to glorify Him, to give praise to Him, to honor Him, and to reflect His nature—His glory—in the world.

And we turned against Him and rebelled against Him, and sin entered the human heart. And ever since that time, every person who has walked the earth has fallen short of the glory of God—missed the mark that God intended them to hit. And because we have missed the mark and fallen short of His glory and fallen into sin, the wage of sin put upon us, as God promised before we rebelled against Him, would be death.

And so in His mercy and His kindness, instead of Adam and Eve dying instantly, they started to decay and old age and die. And God slayed an animal on their behalf. He caused the first death there, and then He covered their sin, their nakedness, their shame, and their guilt with the skin of an animal as a sacrifice or an atonement for their rebellion against His holy and divine and perfectly pure nature.

This is how it all started. This is the context in which the church is born—into a sinful, rebellious people full of individuals with their heart bent toward deception and evil. But God, in His mercy, has been patient with humanity—kind with humanity.

And when evil grew so bad on the earth, God said He could no longer stand it anymore. He was even saddened that He made the world, and He decided to cleanse the world through a massive flood. And He washed the earth with the cleansing waters of a flood.

And there was massive death on the earth. But before this, in His grace and His kindness, He commissioned a man named Noah to call forth... This is our history, friends. This is human history. He called forth a man named Noah and his family, and He sustained their lives as they built an ark to survive this flood. And they brought animals on this flood to continue on with the mammals and the birds of the sky and the fish of the sea, so we could enjoy still the creation that we have today.

And God did this. And the Bible says when the judgment came, not only did it rain for 40 days and 40 nights, but the surface of the deep burst forth, and it was violent here on the earth. And we know now

that we have continents because of this violence. We have mountain ranges because of the colliding of the plates in that violent time of judgment.

But then God sustained us, and in His kindness He called forth a family on the earth through a man named Abraham. And Abraham begat Isaac and Jacob and Joseph. And God started to create a people that He would teach His ways to, so that we could learn to walk in holiness and righteousness before Him.

And then Moses was raised up, and God gave him His law—the Ten Commandments—which was a standard by which human beings are to live and exposed even more our sinfulness and our failures before God. Because there's no one righteous and no one who measures up. All of us missed the mark.

And then God sustained this family down through history with sacrifice after sacrifice of animals for atonement for human sin down through the Old Testament time. And they groped through history—sometimes in the Promised Land that God led them in, sometimes kicked out of the Promised Land because of their disobedience.

And all through this time, God is waiting. He's being patient.

And then we read in Galatians chapter four—we're getting to the time of the church. In Galatians chapter four, it says, “When the time had fully come...” I don't know why this time. It's under God's sovereign authority and His choosing. Down through human history, when the time of His choosing came, He sent His Son.

Imagine it, friends. God, who has watched all of this unfold down through history, now at this moment in history—some 2000 years ago—sends His Son into the world. And then we have some specifics about it. He was born of a woman. The Creator became part of the creation and was birthed into creation Himself through the pains of childbirth as an infant.

The Bible says He took on the very nature of human likeness. The Creator did. Came among us in the form of us. Why? He was born under the law—under His own law—in His own creation.

Do you understand this? This is just phenomenal, friends.

We confess it every week in here. “When the time had fully come, God sent His Son Jesus, born of a virgin.” Mary was encompassed by the power of the Spirit and impregnated by the Spirit of God with God Himself. And this child then was born of this woman, under His own law.

Isn't it nice to consider a ruler, or one in authority, who actually abides by His own law—doesn't consider Himself above the law? He's born of a woman, born under the law.

Why? To redeem those of us under the law. To redeem us.

What does that word “redeem” mean? I happen to have a little hobby. When springtime rolls around and the grass is short, I hop in a little Gator, pull a little wagon down the road, and I pick up cans that were thrown in the ditch. There’s a lot of them. There’s a lot of just sort of disrespect for creation in our world. And there’s just can after can after can.

And what I do is I pick them up, I put them in the thing, and then I haul them in, and then I take them to the redemption center. Because instead of wasting away in uselessness out there in the ditch, the redemption center will take them and redeem them—buy them back to be used again for the purpose for which they were created.

Redemption. Jesus came to redeem those of us under the law—those of us who were cast into a useless ditch by human sinfulness—to purchase us and buy us back so that we could have a very purposeful, meaningful life for which we were created.

The very thing we were designed to do.

That’s why we’re redeemed—so that God could then reinvigorate us to do what He created us to do in the very beginning: glorify Him and praise Him and give Him honor for who He is.

To redeem those of us under the law, so that we could have our purpose back, and then so that we might receive adoption into His family as His children. We might get our identity right before God.

Because then, as His children—to do His purposes—He could send His Spirit into our hearts so we could be empowered as His children. And that empowerment would testify with our spirit that we’re His children, and we would begin to understand that we’re His children. And we would cry out, “Abba, Father,” to who God is.

And then Paul ends this section saying, then under Christ, we’re no longer enslaved by sinfulness, but we’re God’s children. And as His children, then we can hope in all eternity to be His heirs, in His family.

So this is the work of Jesus and why He came—when God sent His Son into the world to redeem us, to adopt people into His family so they could be His heirs for all eternity.

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—and then you get to Acts, where we’re at, where after Jesus did the work of redemption, paying the penalty for human sin, shedding His blood on our behalf, dying in our stead, being resurrected again, He said to His disciples as He was appearing to them over a period of 40 days: “I want you to go and wait in Jerusalem for the promise of my Father.”

“And when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, you’ll be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth.”

Acts chapter one—Jesus giving the commission.

Acts chapter two—Pentecost and the Holy Spirit being poured out on the believers.

Acts chapters three through seven—the believers being empowered in Jerusalem, supernaturally empowered by the Spirit of God to bear witness to the salvation and the work of Christ in the world and who He was.

Persecution comes upon them in Acts chapters eight through twelve. They're thrust out of Jerusalem into Judea and Samaria. They start to go north and south, doing just what Jesus said they would do.

And now we're into Acts chapters thirteen through twenty, where now they're going to the rest of the known world and to all the earth at that time.

Today we're in chapters 18, 19, and 20. We're in the middle of Paul's second missionary journey. We looked at it last week. Paul has left Jerusalem. He's gone north. This is the second time.

The first missionary journey—he was in Cilicia there. Now he's going north up through Tarsus. We saw he met Timothy. He met Lydia. Going along the north there through Asia. He's been to Macedonia. He's coming down there through Greece, in that area—Acacia. And he's coming over to the very center part there in Ephesus, where we pick up our text for today.

But before we jump in to look at the text, I just want to make some observations about the work of the church. That's what Acts is about. It's about, all of a sudden, the church being empowered to do the work that God commissioned it to do.

And when you read through Acts, there are some things that are included in this work, and there are many things that aren't included in this work. Luke is, under the Spirit of God, emphasizing the work of the church—what the Holy Spirit empowers people to do. And so we see, as we study Acts, Paul and his disciples—they're doing certain things, and they're not doing other things.

One thing you don't see them doing in Acts is pursuing worldly titles, worldly accomplishments, notoriety, or personal gain. You don't see it happening here. There is no record of the disciples going into one of these cities, assessing the city's power structures, assessing the city's economic structures, and trying to discern how they might make the most money and attain the most power in that community.

We just don't read that here. We read something else.

Now, to be clear, there's nothing wrong with worldly titles. Many of the disciples had worldly titles. Paul had many worldly titles. He had achieved many titles before he even became a Christian. But Paul would write about those titles—they became like a dung heap to him compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Jesus Christ.

All of that became, in a sense Paul describes, as meaningless to him—like a dung heap, he said: worldly possessions, his worldly accomplishments, his worldly titles.

Certainly we see the Apostle Paul did some work in a worldly trade to attain some resources to fuel his mission. But we have no sense of him trying to make himself massively wealthy in this world. He was a tentmaker by trade, and as he would make tents and sell them, he would probably get some money.

As a matter of fact, he took some pride in doing that, so that the churches that he served didn't always have to give him money for the mission. We see him doing some of these worldly things to fuel the mission, but we don't see any of them pursuing these things of first importance. They're in subjugation to this other work that they're doing.

Before the death and resurrection of Jesus, they did pursue these things. They argued, as a matter of fact, over who is going to be the greatest, who is going to have the best titles in the kingdom. But after the Spirit came upon them, those things were put to death in them.

We also don't see them pursuing worldly pleasures, worldly entertainments, or personal comforts. Matter of fact, quite the opposite. They had great discomfort in doing this work. I would suggest some of it was not that pleasurable.

When you read through the text—and we really don't read anything about them sitting around being entertained—a lot of the time they were about something else.

Now, if I've offended you in some way already, you're welcome. Because our world is filled with temptations for pleasures and numbing levels of entertainments and personal comforts. There are millions and billions of dollars spent to get you and I to, in a sense, waste our time on trivial things in our world—the lust of the flesh, the boastful pride of life, and the lust of the eyes.

And to be about the work of the church, you have to die to these things.

Now, that isn't to say you can't have worldly titles and great wealth and enjoy the pleasures of this life. God, in His sovereignty, can allow these things if we keep them in perspective. But they are—they are not the work of the church. They aren't. They're not a part of what we're called to by Jesus.

Certainly, He provides everything for our enjoyment, but this is not a part of the mission and the work of eternity.

What the disciples were doing is they were making known—here's their work, as I can best describe it myself—making known to anyone they could. This is the work. Making known to anyone they could the possibility of being a part of and growing in the glorious, eternal kingdom of God forever