

ACTS—WEEK 18

GOD’S ALWAYS IN CHARGE



F. Michael Slay

A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

Acts 19:11–20:12 — God's Always in Charge

*The Cover Picture is "Paul in Ephesus" by Eustace Le Sueur (1616–1655),
on display at The National Gallery, London.*

To the untrained eye, Paul's life seems chaotic and dangerous, but God's hand is ever-present. It looks like a series of amazing coincidences.

It is anything but.

We're pleased to provide *the DEEP* studies in PDF format at no charge. We hope you will find them helpful and encouraging as you press on in your journey toward spiritual maturity in the Lord.

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We are a spiritual fellowship patterned after the Celtic Revival. Our goal is to promote revival, renewal, and awakening, following the teaching of Scripture and the example and heritage of our forebears in the faith.

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Thank you.

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1 Acts 19:11–20 (ESV)

And God was doing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, 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. 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." Seven sons of a Jewish high priest named Sceva were doing this. But the evil spirit answered them, "Jesus I know, and Paul I recognize, but who are you?" 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. 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. Also many of those who were now believers came, confessing and divulging their practices. 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. So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily.

Everyone's impressed with all the *extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul*, so imitators are sure to try to get in on the action. This time they get a little more action than they bargained for.

Seven brothers try to cast out an evil spirit. *But the evil spirit answered them, "Jesus I know, and Paul I recognize, but who are you?" 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.*

Now that's what I call an attitude adjustment.

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.

Now everyone gets it. This isn't a bunch of parlor tricks; it's the lordship of Christ in action. Paul's not healing the sick and casting out evil spirits with incantations; it's the power of God. The creepy failure of the seven brothers horrifies everyone and calls to mind scripture's strong condemnation of magic.

There shall not be found among you ... anyone who practices divination or tells fortunes ... or a sorcerer or a charmer or a medium ... is an abomination to the LORD. — Deuteronomy 18:10–12

So they publicly burn all their magic books.

This was a strange revival, but a revival nonetheless. It wasn't all that unlike what a revival today should be. People need to suddenly get it—to see themselves truthfully and be shocked by it.

Revival doesn't come from clever preaching; it comes from God. The way to get revival is to pray for one. Don't focus on a particular way it might happen—that's likely to surprise us anyway—just ask the Lord to call people to Himself.

Pray that He will glorify Himself through a great movement of His Spirit.

2 Acts 19:21–27 (ESV)

Now after these events Paul resolved in the Spirit to pass through Macedonia and Achaia and go to Jerusalem, saying, "After I have been there, I must also see Rome." And having sent into Macedonia two of his helpers, Timothy and Erastus, he himself stayed in Asia for a while.

About that time there arose no little disturbance concerning the Way. For a man named Demetrius, a silversmith, who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought no little business to the craftsmen. These he gathered together, with the workmen in similar trades, and said, "Men, you know that from this business we have our wealth. And you see and hear that not only in Ephesus but in almost all of Asia this Paul has persuaded and turned away a great many people, saying that gods made with hands are not gods. And there is danger not only that this trade of ours may come into disrepute but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis may be counted as nothing, and that she may even be deposed from her magnificence, she whom all Asia and the world worship."

Demetrius's argument is basically, "Paul says that we deceive people by making these phony gods but, hey, *from this business we have our wealth.*" This isn't going to end well for Demetrius and his cronies—and we'll see that soon—but for now let's look at their sinful attitude. How did they get to this point?

This is all about "looking out for number one." Money trumps morality. People usually don't even think about morality unless they're on a jury. The business of day-to-day life is business. In the first century, Artemis tourism was the economic engine for Ephesus. The Temple of Artemis was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Temple_of_Artemis

Making *silver shrines of Artemis* was a first-rate gravy train, and the craftsmen were too busy getting rich to think about things like truth and morality. Paul was challenging their worldview, but the idea that Paul might be right hadn't even crossed their minds.

They had more important things to think about.

We should always do charity because if someone doesn't have food or shelter, asking them to spend time pondering the claims of Christ is almost insulting. If you're letting their physical needs go unmet, they're not going to be interested in your beliefs.

But today's lesson is about the other end of the economic spectrum. Rich people tend to be less open to the gospel than poor people. Everything's going just fine with them, and they don't need anything else.

But everything's not really just fine, and every once in a while, we see the mask slip when someone who "has everything" commits suicide or dies trying to escape their pain chemically.

Who do you know who's too busy to care about the gospel? Think carefully how you can reach them.

And ask God to give you an opportunity.

3 Acts 19:28–41 (ESV)

When they heard this they were enraged and were crying out, “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” So the city was filled with the confusion, and they rushed together into the theater, dragging with them Gaius and Aristarchus, Macedonians who were Paul's companions in travel. But when Paul wished to go in among the crowd, the disciples would not let him. And even some of the Asiarchs, who were friends of his, sent to him and were urging him not to venture into the theater. Now some cried out one thing, some another, for the assembly was in confusion, and most of them did not know why they had come together. Some of the crowd prompted Alexander, whom the Jews had put forward. And Alexander, motioning with his hand, wanted to make a defense to the crowd. But when they recognized that he was a Jew, for about two hours they all cried out with one voice, “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!”

And when the town clerk had quieted the crowd, he said, “Men of Ephesus, who is there who does not know that the city of the Ephesians is temple keeper of the great Artemis, and of the sacred stone that fell from the sky? Seeing then that these things cannot be denied, you ought to be quiet and do nothing rash. For you have brought these men here who are neither sacrilegious nor blasphemers of our goddess. If therefore Demetrius and the craftsmen with him have a complaint against anyone, the courts are open, and there are proconsuls. Let them bring charges against one another. But if you seek anything further, it shall be settled in the regular assembly. For we really are in danger of being charged with rioting today, since there is no cause that we can give to justify this commotion.” And when he had said these things, he dismissed the assembly.

This time it's not the Jews who are stirring up trouble; it's the local craftsmen, but the objection is the same. “Christianity is messing up our system.” But they're messing up a system too—a bigger one.

There's a useful cliché about the culture Christianity was born into—“All roads lead to Rome.” The Roman Empire was a built empire, not just a conquered one. Roads, aqueducts, libraries, you name it. Their technology seems primitive to us, but to them, it was awesome. The people in the Roman Empire were thrilled to live in an age full of new wonders and blessings.

And key was crucifixion—the top punishment in their criminal justice system. It made the streets safe, so civilization flourished. Everything was designed to defend “the system,” and anything that threatened the Pax Romana was snuffed out. They don't want to be *charged with rioting*. So, *the town clerk* gets everyone's attention when he says, “*For we really are in danger of being charged with rioting today.*”

They don't need to explain what that means. Everyone clears out immediately.

The very system that crucified Christ saved Paul's bacon here. Imagine being a Christian in the first century. Imagine seeing crucifixions—every time being reminded of the Lord's suffering—and hating it. Yet Paul was protected by the intimidation that Roman justice provided.

There are often good reasons for things we think are bad. Sometimes we discover these silver linings and sometimes we don't. Praise God for the amazing way that He works.

4 Acts 20:1–6 (NIV)

When the uproar had ended, Paul sent for the disciples and, after encouraging them, said goodbye and set out for Macedonia. He traveled through that area, speaking many words of encouragement to the people, and finally arrived in Greece, where he stayed three months. Because some Jews had plotted against him just as he was about to sail for Syria, he decided to go back through Macedonia. He was accompanied by Sopater son of Pyrrhus from Berea, Aristarchus and Secundus from Thessalonica, Gaius from Derbe, Timothy also, and Tychicus and Trophimus from the province of Asia. These men went on ahead and waited for us at Troas. But we sailed from Philippi after the Festival of Unleavened Bread, and five days later joined the others at Troas, where we stayed seven days.

Paul has no fear, yet he runs away from a potential trap. Why doesn't he just assume that God will rescue him?

Because that's not how it works.

Jesus answered, "It is said: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" — Luke 4:12 (cf. Deuteronomy 6:16)

Intentionally walking into a trap would be the height of arrogance.

(Note: The Holy Spirit will later specifically direct Paul to walk into a trap. That's different.)

Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; — Proverbs 3:5

But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; — 1 Corinthians 1:27

Biblical wisdom trumps secular wisdom, but that doesn't mean secular wisdom is useless. The Lord said, *"Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves."* — Matthew 10:16b

Just as Paul shrewdly avoided trouble, so should we.

But sometimes the Spirit tells us to do something surprising. How can we know when it's from God and not something else?

As always, the key is prayer. Without prayer, the Lord's leading can be impossible to discern—but He honors humble requests.

Do you need guidance on a tough issue? Try asking for a sign.

That may sound silly, but it's perfectly legit. But pick an appropriate sign. It can't be just anything; it needs to point clearly in the right direction. If God wants you to do something, He'll open a door.

Ask the Lord to make His will obvious.

5 Acts 20:7–12 (NIV)

On the first day of the week we came together to break bread. Paul spoke to the people and, because he intended to leave the next day, kept on talking until midnight. There were many lamps in the upstairs room where we were meeting. Seated in a window was a young man named Eutychus, who was sinking into a deep sleep as Paul talked on and on. When he was sound asleep, he fell to the ground from the third story and was picked up dead. Paul went down, threw himself on the young man and put his arms around him. “Don’t be alarmed,” he said. “He’s alive!” Then he went upstairs again and broke bread and ate. After talking until daylight, he left. The people took the young man home alive and were greatly comforted.

What’s more impressive: that Paul raised Eutychus from the dead, or that he didn’t let that distract him from finishing his sermon? He treated the incident like a minor interruption.

Great saints have a mind-boggling level of focus, but how do they do it?

Confidence. The distractions don’t distract them because they don’t lead to second guessing.

Paul was sure of his message, and sure he was supposed to deliver it. The fact that it took all night is just more evidence of his confidence. I wouldn’t have tried such a long sermon in the first place.

And if I did, I surely would have taken Eutychus’s nap as a hint.

But Paul knew better.

That level of confidence is almost a gift.

And even Paul didn’t have that confidence every minute of every day. (His initial understanding of the coming shipwreck on Malta was wrong.) Sometimes he too saw “through a glass darkly.”

Every Christian can be given this gift from time to time, but it comes from knowing His will and being confident in that knowledge. And, of course, the only way to know God’s will is to ask Him to reveal it. That leads to a different kind of prayer—maybe better called a different kind of “prayer posture.”

We tend to spend much of our time asking God for help with something or someone dear to our hearts. That’s good—the Lord told us to “ask whatever we wish”—but those prayers should only be a part of our prayer life.

If we’re serious about Jesus being the lord of our lives, then our relationship should be one of a servant checking in with his boss. That would normally involve asking for direction, not favors.

Do not take this lightly. Prayers for guidance can get uniquely exciting.

Warning: this doesn’t mean you’ll like the answer. When God is calling the shots, surprising things can happen. Exciting things—if you like surprises.

