

February 15, 2009
The National Presbyterian Church

Advantages and Disadvantages

Acts 19:8-10

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We're in the middle of a series of sermons on St. Paul and his friends, the early church and the cities they loved. We have been journeying with Paul and his teammates through the Mediterranean world in the Book of Acts, to see the cities that Paul went to and what happened in those cities, and what we can learn about Paul for ourselves and for our own lives in the city we live in as we watch that journey unfold.

Last week, we were in Athens and Paul preached his great sermon on Mars' Hill. From there, he went to Corinth. He had some remarkable experiences at Corinth. He preached in the synagogue as he always did. Some people resisted what he said there, and actually brought charges against him so that was afraid had to appear before the Roman proconsul. It turns out that that proconsul was a man named Gallio. Gallio is the brother of the famous philosopher Seneca, which is an interesting first century piece of news because later when Paul was imprisoned in Rome, Seneca is still alive. Perhaps, who knows? Did they meet each other? We don't know. Many have wondered if Seneca and Paul ever met. But Paul met his brother the proconsul for sure; his brother heard the charges and dismissed them against Paul. So, in a sense, he was rescued by that Roman proconsul.

He was upset though at the synagogue, and actually he makes a brash statement at Corinth that he probably would later regret. He says, "As a result of the Jews in the synagogue resisting me, I'm never going to talk to the Jews again." The irony of that hasty announcement is found the very next line in Acts which tells that Justin, the ruler of the synagogue then became a believer and Paul baptized him. So the Lord had the last word on that one and Paul never makes a brash statement like that again. But he did have great success with non-Jews. He established the Corinthian church. He met two friends there who became his good friends for the rest of his life, Priscilla and Aquila. He meets them. They were sent from Rome to Corinth,

and the three met there. Priscilla and Aquila go on to Ephesus ahead of Paul and then he follows them to Ephesus.

It's Ephesus that I want us to look at today. Acts chapter 19 tells us the account of Paul in Ephesus. He entered the synagogue. See, he's already asked for forgiveness for saying, "I'll never talk to the Jews again." He entered the synagogue and for three months he spoke boldly, arguing and teaching about the kingly reign of Christ, the Kingdom of God. In other words, sharing his message about the fact that Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of the Old Testament journey, of the Old Testament hope. He's the fulfillment. He is God speaking for himself and the Lord Jesus Christ is the great center of Paul's message.

But when some were stubborn and disbelieved, same thing that happened at Corinth, speaking evil of the way, the Christian movement was called "The Way" in the New Testament, then he withdrew from them, taking some disciples with him. And he argued daily or taught daily in the hall of Tyrannus.

I've been able to visit Ephesus and I was there last summer. As a matter of fact, I had a marvelous guide last summer who was actually a professor at the university in Izmir and an expert on the first century period. Ephesus is being continually excavated, continually uncovered. Our professor noted that there is a serious search for the location of Tyrannus Hall. Where is Tyrannus Hall? It may have been in the market area. It might have been on the main street. Who knows?

Someday, they may find an inscription on some wall or in some arch that says "Tyrannus Hall." That would be a great moment because Paul rented that hall. We have an ancient manuscript that tells us that he rented it from 11:00 in the morning until 4:00 in the afternoon two years plus. He taught in that hall, Tyrannus Hall, between 11:00 till 4:00.

It's not exactly the best time of day in the Middle East, especially in the summer because there was no air conditioning so it's a little hot. But that was when the hall was available. In the early morning, wealthy people would probably rent it for yoga classes. In the evening, who knows? In the evening, it would be rented for orations and theatrical performances by rich people. But it was free between 11:00 and 4:00. And so Paul taught during those hours.

That means two and a third years he was in Ephesus, this ancient city, which by the way, by the third century, had become deserted. Ephesus, which has become one of the greatest archeological sites in all the world was spared for archeologists because malaria came into the city. When the harbor silted and lagoons were formed, malaria came. People didn't know that malaria was caused by mosquitoes. And so they moved gradually toward Kusadasi, which is on today's coast and the city of

Ephesus died and simply was deserted. Dirt covered it and the archeologists have now uncovered the city. But when he was there, it was a port city. Ships came in to its harbor. The Silk Route went to Ephesus too.

He was so successful, in fact, the text says that the residents of Asia (that means the Roman province of Asia, which is where Ephesus is) heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks. So it was successful. In fact, it was so successful that the success caused a problem. Verse 23, "... about that time there arose no small stir concerning the Way. For a man named Demetrius, a silversmith, who made shrines of Artemis, became outraged." And you can read about that. He then gathered the other silversmiths and said, "You know, the sale of the shrines of Artemis, which were well-known in the first century world," Artemis was the goddess of Ephesus. Athena for Athens but Artemis for Ephesus. The Romans called her Diana but the Greeks called her Artemis. And they built a great temple to her. In fact, the temple to Artemis built at Ephesus was so large it had 88 columns, unlike the few columns of the Parthenon. And in fact, it was so vast that you could put two Parthenons inside of the temple to Artemis at Ephesus. It was one of the Seven Wonders of the ancient world.

Today, there's only one column left. They have assembled one column and ironically, there's a stork's nest on top of that column; one column to show you how big and immense were the columns, the 88 columns of the Temple of Artemis. After Ephesus died as a city, the marble was taken away to other sites and to other places which was typical of the ancient times.

Here's a little trivia point that may interest you. If you go to Istanbul today, the largest church in the world was the church built in the ninth century by the Greek Orthodox Church called Hagia Sophia. It's now a Muslim mosque. Though recently, Turkey has turned it into a museum and they're taking the paint off the walls, uncovering the great mosaics that are in Hagia Sophia. But if you go into Hagia Sophia, you can see the pillars that support Hagia Sophia; most of them were originally from the Temple of Artemis. So they brought them up in the ninth century and put them into that great church. But when Paul was there, the Temple to Artemis was vast. In it was the statue of Artemis, who was a warrior god, and also a fertility god. Her little silver shrines were sold widely; now the sale of those shrines has dropped off.

The silversmith warned the citizens of Ephesus, "There is danger not only that this trade of ours may come into disrepute but also the temple of the great goddess, Artemis, may count for nothing and she may even be deposed from her magnificence." Well, this outraged the crowd. The crowd then went down to the great amphitheater, which is still standing to this day. It sits 27,000 people. And they filled the amphitheater. One man tried to speak to the crowd and when they spotted

that he was Jewish, they went into a complete outrage. And the crowd shouted for two hours without stopping, "Great is Artemis, Goddess of the Ephesians!" They couldn't think of much else to say. That's the problem with idols. What do you say about your idol? So they kept saying that over and over again for two hours, and it was in danger of turning into a riot. You can read this in the text, Paul wanted to go in and talk to the crowd. And his friends said, "No, don't go in there. It's going to be too dangerous." And so they kept him out. Finally, the city clerk, came in to the arena and said, "You better stop this because if you are rioting, the Roman soldiers will come." The Romans would not tolerate rioting. That is what we call the Pax Romana; they would not tolerate any kind of insurrection. So we'll lose our city, free city status, if the Romans come with their soldiers. So, the crowd dissipated. That's the scene that happened at Ephesus. What an amazing experience Paul had at Ephesus.

Today I want to notice St. Paul and his ministry that we've already observed partly throughout each city. I want us to reflect on the kind of ministry that Paul had and how he lived his life and how he carried on his ministry so that we can learn from it. Because I think if we watch Paul in action and we're at a point now where we can, we can watch Paul in action and we'll discover some guidelines for our own lives that we're living because we live in cities, too. This is a great city we're living in. St. Paul's ministry offers guidelines for how we share our faith, we learn it from Paul. I want to make three reflections.

First, the secret of St. Paul in his ministry was, first of all, his centeredness. There is a very clear centeredness in St. Paul. He doesn't say everything about every subject. He has one great theme, and the theme is Jesus Christ as Lord, the fulfillment of the great kingly hope of the Jews. Throughout the journey of ancient Israel there is a yearning for a father like Abraham, a deliverer like Moses, a king like David. So that when Paul summarizes the Old Testament, teaching about the kingdom of God he sees these three distinct yearnings now fulfilled in the life of Christ. I pointed it out last week that on Mars' Hill probably Paul's main message was what we have in the Book of Luke as he narrates that story.

Luke, who traveled with Paul, heard him preach over and over again and he mainly preached the life of Christ. Jesus did this, he said this, he loved us in this concrete way, he went to the cross, he conquered death. This is Paul's message. When a Philippian jailer comes to Paul and Silas in the middle of the night after the earthquake, the jailer was about to kill himself but Paul says, "Don't do it." Paul does not say, "Now join my church and get into my movement." No, he said, "Believe on the Lord Jesus and you'll be saved." He had a simple and direct message. The best thing we have to offer this city of Washington or wherever we live is Jesus Christ himself. He's our best truth, a living person, and Paul shared what was best, what was most centered. And then secondly, notice in Paul's strategy that he did what he did best, he taught. You'll notice all the way through the cities we've been at, he is mainly a teacher. At Lystra, they threw rocks at him, when he and Barnabas announced that

they were not gods because at first they wanted to worship them. And when they wouldn't allow the people to worship them, then they threw rocks at Paul.

But then notice, the next line in the great text on Lystra, "he and Barnabas returned to Lystra and taught the people." He taught. I always say to people, "Do most what you do best. Find out what you're best at and do it the most." I say it to pastors, I say it to teachers, each of us, "find out what you're good at and do most what you do best." What Paul did best was teaching. Teaching from the Old Testament and narrating the life of Christ and telling the implications of the reign of Christ. That's Paul. Two and a half years at Ephesus he taught. Notice, it's clear in the text. He taught at Lystra. He taught in the Areopagus when he had the chance to give his great sermon on Mars' Hill. It's a teaching moment. He did the same thing at Corinth, he taught. So he does most what he does best.

Secondly, Paul makes use of his advantages and he makes use of his disadvantages, and I want to reflect on that. Paul, in one of the last letters he wrote was to the Philippian Christians. And in that letter, he starts out the letter by saying, "Don't worry about me now that I am in prison now in Rome" because he was now in a Roman imprisonment. He said, "It's turned out all right because now the Praetorian Guard knows I'm here and they're hearing the Good News."

In fact, the last line of Philippian letter is, "Those in Caesar's household send greetings to you." He's winning the guards to Christ. So the fact that I'm in prison, I get a crack at the guards. And not just guards, Praetorian Guards, that's the best guards. And so that's a disadvantage that becomes an advantage. In the fourth chapter of Philippians, he has this amazing line where he shares his world view with the Philippians. He says, "I rejoice greatly that you have sent help to me," because they sent a friend to help him there, "but I don't want you to see that I complain of want." He says, "I'm not complaining of want. For I have learned in whatever state," this is a great famous line from Philippians chapter 4 where Paul is sharing his world view, "I don't complain from want for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content. I keep my sanity wherever I am. I've learned in whatever state I am to keep my sanity. I know how to be abased and I know how to abound. In any and all circumstances, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and facing want, hunger and abundance. I can do all things in Christ who strengthens me." And the word "do" means I can take in stride. "I can take in stride all that I am facing because of Christ." Paul learned the secret of handling plenty and want, advantages, disadvantages and we see it at Ephesus too. Advantages and disadvantages.

Look at the advantages of Saint Paul and of the first century Christians. One, well for Paul, his intelligence is an advantage. This man is bright. This man is linguistically talented. He knows the Hebrew language very well. He knows Greek very well. He is able to communicate as a speaker and writer and he understands Greek philosophy. He quotes Epimenides and he quotes Aratus when he's giving a speech on Mars' Hill.

Also, the Pax Romana itself is an advantage. The fact that the Romans developed the arch and could build roads therefore and aqueducts, the fact that throughout the Roman it was possible to travel from city to city, place to place because of the Pax Romana, the order of the Roman Empire. Though there's a terror in it all because of Roman tyranny, yet there was order and it worked to the advantage of this young Christian movement that was growing throughout the Mediterranean world. His Roman citizenship was an advantage for Paul. It helped him several times. His ability to make friends. Paul had an amazing ability to make friends, with people in all walks of life, both the powerful and the oppressed. He was a really likeable person.

And then the Good News itself. The very Good News itself is so good that it becomes an advantage. What we have to preach is not technical or cultic. We don't have specialized odd themes to talk about. We can talk about Jesus Christ, the man who is knowable and that itself is an advantage. What about the disadvantages? He could only rent Tyrannus Hall from 11:00 in the morning till 4:00 in the afternoon. In the middle of a day in the heat, who wants to go to a lecture? I always avoided classes when I was at Cal after 12:00 noon because you'd fall asleep. So, who wants to go to a class at Tyrannus Hall between 11:00 and 4:00? Think for a minute. Who can go?

I was in Ephesus last year and our guide made an interesting point to us. She said, "You know, the slaves at Ephesus were different than the slaves at Corinth. Most of the slaves, there were some 40,000 slaves at Corinth who kept that economy going but most of those slaves were people dragging ships over the sand spit from one side to the other side, Adriatic to the Aegean Sea because the canal was not there then. They were being used and mercilessly used that way. But the slaves at Ephesus, were the slaves that mainly taught the young people.

It is a fact that most of the teachers in the Roman world were slaves. The teachers of youth were slaves. The slaves in Ephesus were the intellectuals of Ephesus. They just happened to be slaves. Men that have been captured by pirates and then brought in and turned into indentured slaves. They weren't Roman citizens so they became slaves and they became slaves to the wealthy people of Ephesus and they taught their youth.

When do slaves have time off? Not in the morning, they have to be in their houses in the morning. Not in the evening, they have to keep in the houses at night. They might have time off from 11:00 in the morning till 4:00, and Paul had amazing success with slaves. He loves slaves. He is always reaching out to slaves. When you get to the last chapter of the Book of Romans, one-third of the names in that last chapter are slave names. Paul is able to reach them, and they're the intellectuals of the Roman Empire. And how can he do it? Because of the disadvantage of not being able to rent the hall at night for rich people or in the morning for rich people.

He rented it for poor people. Wow.

His imprisonments. Think about that for a minute. Paul is in prison several times in his life, and especially at the end of his life, he's imprisoned in Rome, and that's a fatal imprisonment. He ends up being probably thrown to the lions during Nero's time. He is a contemporary of Nero, and he's in Rome at that terrifying time when Nero went absolutely paranoid and started to punish Christians in the arena. And so when Paul is in Rome, imprisoned, we would call that a disadvantage, wouldn't we? But let me ask you. When did Paul write his great letters? He wrote several of his letters from prison. He had time to write. He had a time to write to the Ephesians, time to write to the Galatians, time to write to Timothy, time to write the great prison Epistles. The imprisonments of Paul actually worked out to his ministry advantage, but they are a disadvantage personally.

Right now, we are in a period of economic downturn. I'm not saying economic downturn is good, and I'm praying earnestly that these incentive plans that are being passed by our Congress will work because we really have to help the global economy and our economy to catch its stride again. But one good thing about economic downturn is it causes you to reevaluate your priorities, to rethink about your life.

I read an article not long ago that the use of the public libraries in New York City and in my city of Seattle, and I hope it's true in Washington, D.C., has exponentially gone up. People are now going to the library. In Seattle, the library is jammed with people. Before, maybe they were so rich they didn't have to go to the library. They could buy books at any bookstore they wanted to. Now they can't afford to buy books in any bookstore, they go to the library and read.

C.S. Lewis, in the early part of his career, used to write that, "I have a flash of poverty right now that I'm living through," and it meant that he didn't buy books. He went to the library and used books, which meant that he couldn't mark the books. He had to read them and make notes of what he read, which helped him intellectually because he had to remember what he was reading and then make notes about it. It's funny. Sometimes what is a downturn, what is a disadvantage can work to your advantage. This can often be true intellectually.

Finally, Paul is watched out for by his friends. His friends watch out for him. We saw it here at Ephesus. He wanted to go and talk to the arena when they were rioting, and his friends said, "No, Paul, you're not going to go in there." They guided him. They protected him. Even the Roman official protected him when the Roman official said, "Hey, folks. We're getting close to a riot now." Gallio protected him. He was watched out for. At Lystra when he and Barnabas refused to be gods for the people and they started throwing rocks at him, we're told in the text that the Christians at Lystra formed a circle around Paul and put their backs to the people who were throwing rocks; they may have saved Paul's life.

Maybe one of those people was the young man from Lystra named Timothy. Who knows? Paul is protected by people who watch out for him. He's watching out for people too, writing letters to them, trying to keep track of them, watching out. And then there's a great mystery that God was watching out for him, too.

Have you ever thought of the fact that God is watching out for you? Have you ever thought of the fact that God not only loves you, he knows your address too? Have you ever thought of the fact that you're protected by God? Not always the way we expect to be protected. After all, 100% of us die eventually, so obviously we're not protected completely but we're protected, because even in our death we're in God's hands. He watches out for us. I don't know about you, but wherever I go, I have a wallet with me with the pictures of my little kids, my little seven grandkids, my kids, the people in my life. In my wallet, have you ever thought of the fact that God carries your picture in his wallet? That he has a picture book, too? Paul says that, you know? He says it in the Philippian letter when he is talking about two Christian friends named Euodia and Syntyche, he says, oh, by the way, their names are in the Book of Life. God carries their picture in his wallet. Don't forget that. God is watching out for you. He knows your name, Paul knew this and I think that's why Paul's ministry is so exciting and is so robust in a way. That's the good news from Ephesus, where the women are strong, the men are good-looking, and the children are above average.

Heavenly Father, thank you for this text. Thank you that Paul makes it in that city because of these friends, because of the Good News he had to share, and because of the mystery that you had your hand on his life. Lord, you have your hand on our lives, too. Our pictures are in your wallet. May we never forget that. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

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Sunday Worship at 9:15 & 11 a.m.
Classes for Adults, Youth, and Children at 9:15 a.m.

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