

## Acts 19:9b-41 The extraordinary power of Jesus

### Introduction

How do you react when another person in the class gets better marks than you in school or university? Or colleagues at work get better appraisal marks for their work performances than you have done? Or a neighbour gets planning permission for a house extension or alteration maybe even similar to something you had applied for but had been turned down by the planning authorities? Or as a Christian you heard of reports from other believers who have apparently had some amazing answers to prayer requests, but your heart cries have still to see any evident results? Or another church in the locality has been the recipient of some significant encouragements in its work, but your own church, just as faithful and dedicated in its ministries has had disappointments at the same time- how would we view the blessings in the other cause? All of us here today could add to this list of scenarios about the kinds of ethical struggles we can experience, maybe even at the present time. When we are happy and all is going well for us the above issues and much more may be non-issues, but when we are exhausted or stressed; or struggling with work pressures, or other demands, something that in itself may be a little thing crossing our pathway, may be the proverbial 'straw that breaks the camel's back'. Paul had seen probably more people converted and churches planted in the Roman world than anyone else in the first generation of followers of Jesus, yet the challenges he overcame to accomplish those goals were little short of remarkable. In contrast to the struggles he experienced continually in Corinth we can easily make the mistake of assuming that the establishment of a Christian witness in Ephesus was much easier. After all once constituted this congregation appeared to grow both in maturity and numbers and show no apparent evidence of the kind of struggles experienced in some of the other churches of that era. A more careful reflection on the biblical text reveals that here also there were some major tests of faith and victories to be won before the apparent triumph of the gospel. Likewise if we as a church are to see the blessings God has in store for us in coming days then we too may have to take some major steps of faith, without human guarantees of success, for the glory of God and the extension of His kingdom in Broughty Ferry.

### 1. Triumphant over the occult (Acts 19:11-20)

(a) **Unusual events** (Acts 19:11-12) *God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, <sup>12</sup> so that even handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him were taken to the sick, and their illnesses were cured and the evil spirits left them.* In times of extraordinary movements of the Holy Spirit in church history there have been some extraordinary events that have taken place. Usually they were not planned in advance by the participants and only as they looked back in calmer moments did they see what the Lord had done through them, or in spite of them. Sadly one of the mistakes Christians have made over the years has been to try and copy the exceptional and extraordinary and seek to institutionalise the supernatural. God cannot be put into a box like that and it can only lead to denial (that it must be a person's lack of faith when 'everyone' is not healed when sick, for example) or disillusionment when the reality on the ground is clearly in contrast to the claims made from the pulpit. Many Christians have seen a small number of very visible answers to our prayers for specific matters-which in all honesty, in some cases, we had not really expected to see happen! It can be over a financial need; a health concern; a job situation or a family problem, for example. However, we cannot assume that God must work in exactly the same way the next time a similar issue arises. Life would certainly be easier that way, but neither the Bible nor daily experience would support it. Acceptance of this reality has tended to move Christians in our culture to want to play safe

and not to expect too much from the Lord to avoid ‘being disappointed’. Yet this falls short of the biblical understanding of walking by faith. Paul reminded the Corinthian Christians in this way: *We live by faith not by sight* (II Corinthians 5:6). This means, for example, that we seek to determine what the Lord would have us do as a church, cost it and set a budget in accordance with the vision, rather than what we think is likely to come in. In the near future we have major decisions to take about a building project. The key question as a congregation is this: do we believe that God wants us to upgrade these premises and if the answer is ‘yes’, are the proposals sufficient to allow us to carry out our ministries in the way He has placed it on our hearts? if again the answer is in the affirmative and the cost implications are a reasonable price for the work then we must step out in faith trusting that the Lord through His people will provide the funds that we require to pay for such a project. This is not a burden for the treasurer alone, but a covenanted agreement of the whole congregation to step forward and play our part in the fulfilment of the vision. This will include additional people stepping forward to give a lead in fundraising ventures; in working groups dealing with building issues; additional deacons and pastoral leaders and much more as together we trust God for the miraculous provision of a particular financial need. In the words of Paul’s prayer in Ephesians (3:20-21) we come to: *Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to His power that is at work within us,*<sup>21</sup> *to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.* In every generation God will allow our faith to be tested –close to the limit- over different issues, but He is able to meet those needs through His extraordinary power. God’s miraculous provision includes surprises in the way that He works. At Ephesus during those two years *God did extraordinary miracles through Paul,*<sup>12</sup> *so that even handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him were taken to the sick, and their illnesses were cured and the evil spirits left them* (Acts 19:11-12). We have insufficient evidence to declare that this was a unique occurrence, but it was certainly very unusual even then. However, we serve a miracle-working God –I trust we all believe that? We dare not miss the blessings He has in store for us because we fail to seek His supernatural intervention in our lives, both individually and collectively. James challenged his readers with these words: *You do not have, because you do not ask God.*<sup>3</sup> *When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures* (James 4:2-3). The question is this: will you rise to the challenge and play your part if the Lord leads us to take a major faith step in the near future? I hope and pray that our answer collectively will be ‘yes’?

(b) **Unexpected exorcists** (Acts 19:13-16)<sup>13</sup> *Some Jews who went around driving out evil spirits tried to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who were demon- possessed. They would say, In the name of Jesus, whom Paul preaches, I command you to come out.*<sup>14</sup> *Seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, were doing this.*<sup>15</sup> *One day the evil spirit answered them, Jesus I know, and I know about Paul, but who are you?*<sup>16</sup> *Then the man who had the evil spirit jumped on them and overpowered them all. He gave them such a beating that they ran out of the house naked and bleeding.* In our sceptical secular country to mention a belief in the devil and evil spirits is not likely to win you many murmurs of approval. The devil has been domesticated into a little red creature with horns and a forked tail, who, for example, tempts you into eating a cream cake when you should be sticking to your diet ...! When God’s people want to take significant steps of faith that will in a major way advance God’s kingdom expect the evil one to attempt to disrupt, discourage and divert our attention. Paul told the Ephesian Christians: *Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power.*<sup>11</sup> *Put on the full armour of God so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes.*<sup>12</sup> *For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms* (Ephesians 6:10-12). There is a clear pattern to the devil’s activity. He is limited in what he can do compared to God, but can cause a great deal of mischief amongst the people of God who do

not recognise what may at times be going on. In my previous congregation there were a handful of key moments when we had planned to take big steps for the Lord and suddenly from nowhere a major problem arose. In the clearest example, in one particular year, we had scheduled a major evangelistic mission over a period of eight days. We had outreach initiatives both in the daytime and in the evenings and in a congregation of half this size we saw seven formerly unchurched people truly and clearly converted and altogether seventy unchurched people attend at least one event that week. Taking a step back to just over a week before the mission, months of planning had appeared to have been successful when suddenly within a few days every member of that committee apart from myself was taken out of the action, either by a major health issue themselves or in their immediate family circle. None of these illnesses had been anticipated and each situation was distinct. Within a week or so after the mission all those health problems that had arisen were gone as quickly as they had arisen and those key people in the church were able to serve in the way they had done before. Although I will be the first to admit that the vast majority of health problems occur simply because we live in a fallen sin-damaged world and Christians are not exempt from the trials and tribulations that befall our fellow citizens, there are occasions when the picture is more complex. It was a sobering moment, as well as an exceedingly joyful one, at the end of that mission to recognise that the powers of hell were bothered by what was going on through the witness of our small congregation in Scotland. The evil one had anticipated the blessing that would follow from our obedience to God at that time and was doing everything in his power to divert us from it. Remember these words of Peter: *Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.* <sup>9</sup> *Resist him, standing firm in the faith* (I Peter 5:8-9a). Direct occult manifestations, like those described in this passage, are mercifully rare in our land. But there is no doubt that when God is at work in unusually special supernatural ways in a church or community there is often a corresponding rise in challenges from the evil one. This is not something to fear because Jesus has already defeated Satan on the cross and His final triumph is assured. Satan is on borrowed time, and he knows it, but will not go down without a fight. Remember this say John in I John 4:4: *You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.* Praise the Lord! Very few wars or battles are won uncontested in both the physical and spiritual realms, but by prayer, and at times also with fasting, and faith in our all-powerful God we will prevail, for our good and for His glory.

(c) **Unsurpassed exchanges** (Acts 19:17-20) <sup>17</sup>*When this became known to the Jews and Greeks living in Ephesus, they were all seized with fear, and the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honour.*<sup>18</sup>*Many of those who believed now came and openly confessed their evil deeds.*<sup>19</sup>*A number who had practised sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly. When they calculated the value of the scrolls, the total came to fifty thousand drachmas.* Evidence of this occult manifestation had an impact not only on the church, but also in the wider community. Read verse seventeen; it took the people of God well beyond their comfort zone, but had an even greater impact on people outside their ranks. As we go forward with the Lord in the next few months and years the pathway to greatest blessing may well be one in which we are stretched to the limits of our faith and resources, prior to seeing the remarkable and wonderful provision of God at work in our community. We will need faith in a great God to see opportunities rather than obstacles when significant difficulties cross our individual or collective pathway. However, at such times we need to recognise that if God has called us to walk this way, then He will provide what we need to merge triumphant. The occult goods burnt when these Greek citizens came to faith in Christ was roughly worth around £4-5 million in our money today. Following Jesus in Ephesus was a decisive and costly step a significant number of people were willing to make. No wonder this church was so strong in the next couple of generations when the commitment of its members had been so visibly

proved. Are the words of William Carey in his famous sermon on world mission to Northamptonshire Baptists all those years ago relevant for us? Expect Great Things (from God) Attempt Great Things (for God). I think so, as He leads us!

## 2. **Triumphing over obstacles** (Acts 19:9b-10, 20-22)

(a) **Creative opportunities** (Acts 19:9b-10) *He took the disciples with him and had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus.* <sup>10</sup> *This went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord.* Paul had been excluded from the synagogue so he needed some other venue to hold his evangelistic meetings. He rented, probably at nominal cost paid for either by Paul or local supporters, the equivalent to a college or school hall and gave daily lectures on the Christian faith, followed by a lengthy time for responding to the questions of the people who had gathered. Two years of meetings indicate that Paul viewed it as a success. What is most probable here is that many local Gentiles would never have entered a synagogue, but would have had no problem visiting the premises of a local educational establishment. In the longer term it may have been a blessing in disguise that Paul was able to use this secular venue. What other information do we know about this ministry? One early manuscript has more information including reporting that Paul hired this facility from 11am to 4pm each day. Why was Paul able to hire this prestigious facility to promote what was a new faith in that city? The reason is simple. The working day in Ephesus ran from 6am to 11am and then from 4pm into the evening. In the middle of the day when it was hot and at times unsuitable for work the majority of local people went for a siesta. More people were asleep there at 1pm than at 1am! Paul, by contrast, worked as a tentmaker during the morning, in order to fund his ministry, and when the majority of people were heading for bed he seized the opportunity to engage with those who were interested in what he had to say about God. All the roads in the province of Asia converged on Ephesus. Thousands of people visited the city to shop, visit relatives, watch a drama in the theatre or the games in the sports stadium. Over time news about this Christian preacher/teacher spread and many people dropped in to listen to him, but more remarkably significant numbers were converted. It is considered likely that the people who founded the Christian churches in Colossae, Laodicea and Hierapolis, the major cities of the Lycus valley, and possibly even in some of the smaller communities in that region, were converted through this particular outreach ministry. We too need to be creative, planning approaches that might be effective in reaching people of the twenty-first century for Christ.

(b) **Combating fears** (I Corinthians 15:32; II Corinthians 1:8-9) This venture all sounds great and highly civilised. We have to look very carefully to find any information to the contrary. Yet in Paul's correspondence with the church in Corinth there are two passages that suggest all was not straightforward in Ephesus. Sadly we have but tantalising glimpses of some of the problems he faced there, but would you like to have had to face what he experienced? Listen to these words: *If I fought wild beasts in Ephesus for merely human reasons, what have I gained? If the dead are not raised...(I Corinthians 15:32)* How on earth did he survive that one! It would certainly have been a colourful reason to explain why he was off work for a while, but being serious he cannot have expected to come out alive from the ordeal of being thrown to the lions. They were kept hungry to ensure they quickly hunted down their prey. Yet God arranged the sparing of his life. Your time and mine is in His hands. For some of us, humanly-speaking our time appears to be cut short –not least Robert Murray McCheyne, in this very city. Others, by contrast, live longer than they ever expected and sometimes wonder: 'Lord, why have I been kept alive when others much younger are taken?' We have no answers to these questions, but trust in the God who we believe has a bigger picture and purpose that we believe is for the greater good of His people. In his second letter to the Corinthians, the

apostle makes a more general, but still very clear point about the difficulties of the work of evangelism in the cities of western Turkey.<sup>8</sup>*We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life.* <sup>9</sup> *Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead* (II Corinthians 1:8-9). You and I will also have times when we struggle to cope with things that cross our pathway. We will have our ‘why’ questions which may often remain unanswered. Yet in a world in which many people live lives without hope and a sense of purpose, we can share with them the truth about a God who loves them and sent His Son to die in their place, so that they can know life in its fullness here on earth and even greater blessings in the world to come. Isaiah 40: 28-31 provides encouragement for us at these times: *Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and His understanding no-one can fathom.*<sup>29</sup> *He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak.* <sup>30</sup> *Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall;* <sup>31</sup> *but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.*

(c) **Careful planning** (Acts 19:20-22) <sup>20</sup>*In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power.* <sup>21</sup>*After all this had happened, Paul decided to go to Jerusalem, passing through Macedonia and Achaia. After I have been there, he said, I must visit Rome also.* <sup>22</sup>*He sent two of his helpers, Timothy and Erastus, to Macedonia, while he stayed in the province of Asia a little longer.* Paul and his team had a clear strategy. Plant a church in the main city of a region and teach and train the converts to move out into the smaller cities, towns and villages planting churches in a systematic fashion community by community. The timescale was never predictable, but it was a practical and effective scheme carried out with careful planning. It is no different today. We too need to pray hard; plan and prepare effectively and trust the Lord to accomplish that which is outside our power to achieve.

### 3. **Triumphing over persecution** (Acts 19:23-41)

(a) **The Reason** (Acts 19:23-27) <sup>23</sup> *About that time there arose a great disturbance about the Way.* <sup>24</sup> *A silversmith named Demetrius, who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought in no little business for the craftsmen.* <sup>25</sup> *He called them together, along with the workmen in related trades, and said: Men, you know we receive a good income from this business.* <sup>26</sup> *And you see and hear how this fellow Paul has convinced and led astray large numbers of people here in Ephesus and in practically the whole province of Asia. He says that man-made gods are no gods at all.* <sup>27</sup> *There is danger not only that our trade will lose its good name, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be discredited, and the goddess herself, who is worshipped throughout the province of Asia and the world, will be robbed of her divine majesty.* In Greek and Roman times, Ephesus was the centre of worship of Diana (or Artemis), goddess of the hunt. The city's religious life was centred on the Temple of Artemis (Diana), one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. In addition to Diana, it is estimated that as many as seventeen gods and goddess were worshipped in Ephesus at one time. The Temple of Artemis was badly damaged by a Goth invasion in 262 AD. It was rebuilt, but not to its former splendour. The population of Ephesus has been estimated to be in the range of 400,000 to 500,000 inhabitants in the year 100 AD. In addition to the great Temple of Artemis, Ephesus boasted a civic library and a theatre, which was the largest in the world, capable of holding 50,000 spectators. Also built in Ephesus around this time were the Roman Baths, including what is believed to be the first instance of indoor plumbed toilets (flushed by running water beneath the latrines)[www.sacred-destinations.com]. God had accomplished something amazing if so many people had been converted that it was influencing the economics of Ephesus. I can only assume, if Demetrius is telling the truth, that several thousand people had been converted. If only a few hundred had become

Christians in a city up to three times larger in population than Dundee, then I cannot see how as ordinary citizens they had had such an impact on the life of the city. However, what legitimate forms of evangelistic outreach should we be engaged in that would have a similar impact on this city? Sometimes we need to stop and think –can we be more effective for God by working another way? The message never changes, but the approach will in each generation. How best can we use the internet and social networking technologies as Christians? These and other questions need to be asked in a week in January 2011 when through *Facebook* and *Twitter* people have organised to overthrow a government in Tunisia and look close to accomplishing the same in Egypt as well.

(b) **The Riot** (Acts 19:28-34) <sup>28</sup>*When they heard this, they were furious and began shouting: Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!* <sup>29</sup>*Soon the whole city was in an uproar. The people seized Gaius and Aristarchus, Paul's travelling companions from Macedonia, and rushed as one man into the theatre.* <sup>30</sup>*Paul wanted to appear before the crowd, but the disciples would not let him.* <sup>31</sup>*Even some of the officials of the province, friends of Paul, sent him a message begging him not to venture into the theatre.* <sup>32</sup>*The assembly was in confusion: Some were shouting one thing, some another. Most of the people did not even know why they were there.* <sup>33</sup>*The Jews pushed Alexander to the front; and some of the crowd shouted instructions to him. He motioned for silence in order to make a defence before the people.* <sup>34</sup>*But when they realised he was a Jew, they all shouted in unison for about two hours: Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!* Demetrius and his colleagues had been making a fortune out of selling the small silver statues of Artemis to both local people and the large number of visitors to the city. He is too smart to draw attention to this fact. Instead he whips the crowd into a frenzy as he highlights his concern that his trade will lose *their good name* (19:27); the temple its reputation (v27) and their goddess her divine majesty. He has also craftily gained the support of the ordinary working people to take on board an issue that was irrelevant to their lives, namely the lucrative business of a few men who operated a 'closed shop' in the city. A huge uproar ensued and a riot took place which the authorities struggled to control. It was a most dangerous situation, yet God had His hand on the situation. Paul was not viewed as being associated with the Jews in this city by the mob. The early separation from the synagogue which must at the time have been viewed as a setback had been in fact a blessing in disguise, in that location. God knew what He was doing behind the scenes.

(c) **The Resolution** (Acts 19:35-41) <sup>35</sup>*The city clerk quietened the crowd and said: Men of Ephesus, doesn't all the world know that the city of Ephesus is the guardian of the temple of the great Artemis and of her image, which fell from heaven?* <sup>36</sup>*Therefore, since these facts are undeniable, you ought to be quiet and not do anything rash.* <sup>37</sup>*You have brought these men here, though they have neither robbed temples nor blasphemed our goddess.* <sup>38</sup>*If, then, Demetrius and his fellow craftsmen have a grievance against anybody, the courts are open and there are proconsuls. They can press charges.* <sup>39</sup>*If there is anything further you want to bring up, it must be settled in a legal assembly.* <sup>40</sup>*As it is, we are in danger of being charged with rioting because of today's events. In that case we would not be able to account for this commotion, since there is no reason for it.* <sup>41</sup>*After he had said this, he dismissed the assembly.* The leader of the city council skilfully pointed out the folly of the protestors' actions and chastened they went home quietly. God had triumphed in and through His people. Romans 8:28 states: *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose.* God hasn't changed. May we trust Him to work for our good and His glory in our lives in coming days, both individually, in our families and in our church family, for Jesus' sake, Amen.