

The Word Continued to Increase Mightily-1 (Acts 18:23-20:38)

The book of Acts is all about the early church, you could say the infant church. It is the story of how the word of God was being proclaimed and lives were being changed.

It started in Jerusalem. The word of God continued to increase and the number of disciples multiplied greatly (6:7). Then after the Holy Spirit fell on the Gentiles, and the church was established in Antioch, we read again that the word of God increased and multiplied (12:24).

The gospel comes to Ephesus, the capital city of Asia. “So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily” (19:20). The word has been “increasing” but here we read it is prevailing. What is it prevailing over and in what way is it prevailing? The word is making a deep impression on the pagan world of the Roman Empire and specifically over Ephesus.

How is the word described in these verses?

1. An Accurate Word. (18:24-26)

A Jew named Apollos is preaching. Apollos was a Jew, a native of Alexandria. He was very eloquent and competent in the Scriptures. Priscilla and Aquila are now in Ephesus, and when they hear Apollos speak, they hear some things that don't line up with what Paul taught.

2. The Complete Word. (19:17)

You remember that years earlier Paul had been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to go to Asia. He found some disciples in Ephesus, but it is not clear whose disciples they are. They could have been disciples of John the Baptist. Paul explains that John told people to believe in the one who was to come after him—Jesus. It seems they hadn't heard that the Christ had come in the person of Jesus and that he had lived, died, resurrected, ascended, and then sent his Spirit to indwell believers. When they heard the complete word, they believed, received it and were baptized into it.

3. A Bold Word. (19:9-10)

Paul began his Ephesus ministry in the synagogue focused on the Jews. Daily, he spoke boldly, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God (19:8). This is what they needed to hear. Some became stubborn and continued in unbelief, so Paul withdrew from them and began going to the “hall of Tyranny's”, a place in the city where people engaged in public debate. He just keeps talking about Jesus. He preached in Ephesus and in other cities in Asia until the word of the Lord was heard throughout the region.

4. A Healing Word. (19:11-13)

He preaches the word and heals. The sons of Sceva decide they are going to use the words of Paul to drive out evil spirits. “I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul proclaims.” They see this as a way to make a profit. But it doesn't go the way they thought it would. (15-19)

Throughout the gospels, demons know who Jesus is. They have submitted to him and the apostles. These sons of Sceva ran naked and wounded out of the house. “So the word of the Lord was growing and prevailing mightily” (20).

5. A Dangerous Word. (19:23-41) (“gods made by hands are not gods at all”) (26)

A silversmith by the name of Demetrius stirs up opposition to Paul. The word of God is dangerous. It poses a danger to false worship and false religiosity. It counts idols “as nothing.” The workmen were enraged. (“Great is Artemis and the sacred stone that fell from the sky”)

(35). Meteorites were associated with Artemis worship, so it appears a meteorite fell from the sky at some point. The word of the Lord is a threat to false idols.

6. An Encouraging Word. (Acts 20)

As Paul visited the various churches in Macedonia, spending three months providing “much encouragement.” This is the setting of perhaps one of the longest sermons ever preached. Paul preached long into the night. A young man named Eutychus was sitting in a window, fell into a deep sleep and fell down from the third story. “He was taken up dead” (10). Paul said, “Do not be alarmed, for his life is in him.”

Paul began his sermon on the Lord’s Day and then he “prolonged” the speech (20:7). Then Paul talked still longer (20:9). He kept talking all day until midnight when he was interrupted by Eutychus falling asleep and falling out of the window. We would like to know more about Paul taking him in his arms and apparently bringing him back to life from having died from the fall but the text seems to want us to focus on something else. (11-12)

The focus is on the encouraging word Paul was sharing with them. A man is brought back to life, and Paul simply picked up where he left off talking another 6 hours. The miracle wasn’t the most important thing that happened that night. The encouragement of believers was the most important thing.

7. A Profitable Word.

From Troas to Jerusalem. His journey is by foot and by boat along the west coast of Asia. He lands in Miletus which is 36 miles south of Ephesus. He sends for to the elders of the church in Ephesus to come to him for what would be a profitable word, in some ways a painful word, and significantly his final word to them in person. (18-24)

Paul expects to be put in jail. He expects to be mistreated. He expects suffering. He expects to never see the Ephesians again (25). The Ephesians and others can expect adversity. Paul had shared the “whole counsel of God. There will be some who will rise up within the church who will have much to say but it will be less than the whole counsel of God. (26-27)

Ephesians 2:12-13 “remember that you were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the people of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of the promise, having no hope and without God in the world. 13 But now in Christ Jesus you who previously were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.”

8. Grace. (32)

The word of grace! This is the word that prevails! The word of God is a word of grace made available to sinners through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, a word that has the power not only to save but also to sanctify. This word has the power to keep the church in Ephesus strong and growing.

verses 36-38 “When he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. 37 And they all began to weep aloud and embraced Paul, and repeatedly kissed him, 38 grieving especially over the word which he had spoken, that they would not see his face again. And they were accompanying him to the ship.”

We need this word of grace in our lives—to tell us the truth, convict us of sin, correct our misunderstandings, clarify our confusion, heal our brokenness, build us up, encourage us, purify us. We need to word of grace to get the final defining, saving word in our lives.