

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(August 4, 2019)

Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Under Construction

(studies in Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus)

The Story of Ephesus

(as told by Timothy)

Greetings

To all you Gentiles, Greeks and otherwise - *χαρις και ηρηνη*, paz y gracia, grace and peace!

And, of course, to my Jewish friends, *shalom*.

I am Timothy, a tentmaker and a servant of the Lord Jesus. It is great to be with you today at Northwest Community Church.

I bring you greetings from the churches of Asia Minor, and trust that you are enjoying God's richest blessings as you trust Him.

Preparing to tell the story of the church at Ephesus

Your Elders invited me to tell you of the remarkable work of God in one of our oldest churches, the church at Ephesus.

Now, this is a church I love dearly. It is a church that has seen some very good and some very hard times.

Well, I have just returned from Ephesus and I'm here to tell you that it is doing great!

The church there was one of the first Gospel outposts in Asia Minor, a church founded by the Apostle Paul himself.

I should know. I was with him when it all happened about forty years ago.

I'm honored to be able to tell you the story of this church. And, since you and I have just now met, let me tell you a bit about myself.

Family

My father was a fine man and a Greek. He taught me many things, but it wasn't my father who taught me about Jesus. It was my mother. She was a strong Christian, and she passed on her vibrant faith to me.

I grew up in the city of Lystra, in Galatia. And, while I was quite young, I met the man who would show me how to follow Jesus.

Met Paul

The Apostle Paul passed through our city with his good friend, Barnabas, when I was still a child. They came with the message of Jesus.

They didn't stay long in Lystra, but Paul's courage and his friendliness made a lasting impression on me.

Several years later, Paul returned a second time to Lystra. By this time, I was nearly full-grown - at least 15 years old - and he was traveling this time with another man, named Silas.

Paul and Silas needed someone to help them on their journey, what they called a "go-for". Someone who would "go-for" this and to "go-for" that.

They seemed to think that I would do wonderfully in this role, so, they invited me to join them.

My parents gave their blessing and off we went to spread the Gospel of Jesus. Paul, Silas, and me - Timothy!

Travelled with Paul

We traveled all around the regions of Achaia and Macedonia. We took boats across the stormy Aegean Sea and hiked the mountains of Greece.

We shared the Good News that Jesus saves with people from every walk of life.

We held meetings in any place we could get a hearing, making disciples everywhere we went, just like Jesus told us to.

Sometimes we were supported by others; sometimes we had to provide for ourselves.

But - thankfully! - Paul taught me the tent-making trade.

Everybody needs a good tent from time to time. If you can make or fix a tent, you'll never go hungry.

While on this journey and while traveling with Paul, I saw God's power at work.

Jesus saved souls and turned lives around. There were miracles and exorcisms and the beginnings of churches.

Oh, and lest I forget, opposition.

We spent time in jails and on the run. We endured sleepless nights, beatings - even a riot!

But, wait. I'm getting ahead of myself there. That riot happened at Ephesus.

So, let me back up.

Travels

On this journey, we spent a short time in the city of Philippi. Paul and Silas were jailed there for preaching Jesus but were miraculously released.

And quite a number from Philippi - including the jailer and his family - believed in Jesus. We left behind a faith community in Philippi and continued our travels to Thessalonica and Berea and Athens and Corinth.

At every location, some people stood against us. Sometimes they even tried to kill us; always to shut us up and to drive us away.

But, when we got to Corinth, we found peace and settled down for about a year and a half of evangelizing and disciple-making.

Then, after fruitful ministry, came the opposition. Those who opposed our message about Jesus targeted Paul with bitter attacks. It was clearly time to hit the road.

So, the whole group of us - Silas, Luke, Paul, Priscilla and Aquila and me - packed our bags and left Corinth to go to Paul's home church in Syrian Antioch.

Paul's and Timothy's first time in Ephesus

On the way to Antioch we briefly passed through Ephesus. What a city!

Ephesus is big. And it had been established hundreds of years before my time to be the commercial center for the whole region.

It's also the seat of Roman government for Galatia and is famous for art, literature, theatre, and education.

But the city's prosperity comes from the worship of the goddess, Artemis.

There is, in Ephesus, an enormous temple dedicated to Artemis. It's located up on a hill overlooking the city. And to stand within its pillars is to be overwhelmed by its size - and its evil.

From all over the world people travel to Ephesus by the thousands to worship Artemis - and the worship is evil, unclean, perverse.

We saw all of this on our brief stay.

While there, Paul spoke to some people in Ephesus. (You couldn't keep Paul from talking to people about Jesus.)

They wanted to hear more. But he was so desperate to get home that he told them, **[Acts 18:21] "I will return to you again if God wills"** - and off we went to Antioch.

At that point I didn't know if we'd ever see Ephesus again.

But, after a few months of rest in Antioch, we left to travel again with the Gospel. Paul decided that it was, indeed, time to go to Ephesus again.

A church is established in Ephesus on a second visit

We arrived at Ephesus a little more than a year after we had left it and found a group of men there who were very interested in what we had to tell them.

These men had heard about John the baptizer, but they didn't know about Jesus because the man who told them about John - Apollos - at that time didn't know much about Jesus himself.

Apollos had told them about John. So, when we came to Ephesus, these twelve men were hungry for anything we could tell them about the One John came to prepare the way for: Jesus!

We told them all about Jesus - His miracles and teaching and love and compassion. And when we told them that there was salvation in no one else but Jesus - they all believed and were all saved!

How fantastic was that!?

In a lot of cities, we didn't ever see that many come to faith. But there in Ephesus, in one day twelve men believed and THAT was the birth of the church.

Life changes in Ephesus

We stayed in Ephesus for roughly two and a half years.

We had great freedom to serve and to speak there, first in the Jewish synagogue and then in the philosophical school of Tyrannus.

By the time we left, **[Acts 19:10] all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.**

I got to help Paul establish these young Christians in the faith. We evangelized and served the city and met needs in Jesus' Name.

And God did what only He could do, validating the truth of the gospel through miracles.

People were healed of diseases. Demons were cast out and there were victories over the powers of the enemy.

During those two and a half years, we saw lives changed.

People in the church became models of purity and holiness as they walked with Jesus.

Many who had been practicing the "dark arts" lit a bonfire and burned the magical books and paraphernalia that they had been using to connect with demon powers.

And others, who had been worshipping idols - including the idols of Artemis - put those idols away.

THAT - getting rid of idols - was the beginning of the end of our stay in Ephesus.

The beginning of the end of their time in Ephesus

See, the Christians' rejection of idols hurt the trade of the city's idol-makers.

So, two of the leading idol-makers - a silversmith named Demetrius and a coppersmith named Alexander - incited the riot that I mentioned earlier against all of us Christians: Paul, Silas, the church, me.

The riot was terrifying. It was like a crowd of people had been turned into a pack of wild beasts!

There were beatings and attempted murder. It was chaos and mayhem.

Finally, the riot died down, but it was clearly not safe to stay in Ephesus any longer.

So, we left Ephesus and turned east to return to Jerusalem, where Paul was determined to go.

More travels with Paul

I wish there was time today to tell you more of Paul's story.

I'd love to tell you of his trial before the Roman governor of Judea - Felix - and of his testimony before the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem.

You'd love to hear of how courageous he was while imprisoned in Caesarea, and about how he gave bold witness before Festus and King Agrippa, and how he appealed to Caesar before Agrippa.

Paul was a mighty force for our God and to walk with him was always to walk into adventure.

Of course, appealing to Caesar meant we had to take a trip to Rome, a trip on the Mediterranean that included a shipwreck and nearly cost all of us our lives.

We finally did arrive at Rome, though. And, while Paul was under house arrest awaiting trial, he wrote letters to some of the churches.

A letter from Paul

One of those letters was addressed to Ephesus.

And, since Paul knew how much I loved those brothers and sisters at Ephesus, he sent me to hand deliver the letter.

He told me to stay and serve in any way the church might have need.

The church received the message of the letter of Ephesians

I had been away from Ephesus for only a few short years. But, when I arrived and visited with some from the church, I received a surprisingly UNenthusiastic greeting.

It turns out that the church wasn't doing well at all.

There was a lethargy and a spiritual laziness about it. The people of the church had fallen back into some very bad, old habits.

So, on the first day of the week, when they gathered for worship, I joined them and walked to the front of the room where they were meeting and I began to read the letter Paul had written to them, out loud.

[1] Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints who are at Ephesus, and who are faithful in Christ Jesus: [2] Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. [3] Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ.

That got their attention.

Then, the church grew completely silent as I read Paul's prayer for them.

[16] [I] do not cease giving thanks for you, while making mention of you in my prayers... [18] I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, [19] and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe.

I continued, reading what Paul had to say about the work of God in saving their eternal souls.

[2:1] And you were dead in your trespasses and sins... but you have been [6] raised up with Him and seated with Him in the heavenly places...

[8] for by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, [9] not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.

I read how Paul begged them to ***[1]... walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which [they] had been called, [2] with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing forbearance to one another in love, [3] being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.***

As I continued, I read passages where he told them to put aside falsehood, to speak truth in love, to not let the sun go down on their anger, to not steal, to use only words that build up.

All that Paul wrote about life in the family - to children and fathers and husbands and wives - and to masters and slaves I read out loud.

The power of God's message!!

Let me tell you: God's message, written by Paul and read by me, bore fruit every bit as wonderful as the healings and miracles we had seen earlier.

There was deep repentance at the reading of God's message from Paul. Revival broke out as the church applied the message to their lives.

It was a beautiful thing to behold as they worshiped God from the heart, embraced their unity despite their great diversity, and started, again, to serve the city in Jesus' Name - just like they had done at the beginning.

That is the power of God's message. It makes impact. It transforms. It changes things as it is sown, like a seed, in good, deep, receptive soil.
Timothy remained in Ephesus; leaves with Paul for Spain

After reading that letter, because of the church's great response to Paul's letter and because they invited me to, I stayed with them and served as their pastor for nearly ten years.

It was a wonderful ten years of doing life together.

I would have stayed longer, too, but for the letter Paul wrote, inviting me to travel with him again - this time to Spain - to tell people there about Jesus.

When I told the church at Ephesus about it, they were as excited as I was and offered to help fund the trip.

(Sometimes churches like to see their pastors go on missions trips - it's good for the pastor and for the church!).

Anyway, I left Ephesus to meet Paul in Rome, and from there, we went to Spain with the Gospel.

That was nearly twenty years ago, and during all those years, I have continued traveling, preaching, teaching, evangelizing.

Paul was put to death in Rome a few years back, but I've carried on the work in his absence. Sometimes, I've made tents, but I've always been intent on making disciples.

Rumors of trouble in Ephesus

Occasionally, over these years, I have heard rumors of how things were going in Ephesus. At first, the reports were positive. More recently, the reports have been most disturbing.

Sure, Ephesus had a well-earned reputation as "the champion of orthodoxy" having stood firm against the Nicolaitans, who taught and practiced heresy.

But they had lost something. They had lost spiritual vitality and passion for Jesus.

Their love for each other had grown cold. The church had become a shell of its former, vibrant, fervent, loving self.

Rumors of revival!

But, then, just weeks ago, a new report came of revival in Ephesus, again.

Prayer and worship and witness were breaking out all over. There was a rebirth of passion.

I had to go see for myself. So, I went to Ephesus and saw with my own eyes that the rumors were all true.

I arrived and headed straight for the home of one of the Elders.

He greeted me with open arms. I asked him, *"Is it true? Has the Lord visited you with revival?"*

He told me it was all true and I asked, *"How? What happened?"*

The power of God's message, again

Without a word, he handed me a short letter. I recognized the handwriting.

It was from the old Apostle John, now living in exile on the island of Patmos for his bold witness for Jesus.

Like I had done, John had also spent some years as the pastor of the church at Ephesus. So, like me, John knew the church well.

The note the Elder had handed me was from John to seven of the churches of Asia Minor. I knew all those churches. I saw that the first letter was addressed to the church at Ephesus.

I unrolled the scroll and saw that John wasn't really the author. The letters had been dictated to John by the resurrected Lord Jesus.

I then read what Jesus had written to Ephesus.

He first commended them for their good deeds and toil and perseverance and for their stand for the truth.

Then He wrote the words that brought the church to repentance.

[Revelation 2:4] "I have this against you, that you have left your first love.

[5] 'Remember therefore from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you, and will remove your lampstand out of its place -- unless you repent.'

Jesus' message hit precisely where the church was struggling.

They still believed all the right things and they still did many of the right things.

Their problem was that they had lost (left?) their love for Jesus.

And I saw, again, the life-changing impact of God's message.

Just as Paul's letter had brought revival twenty years earlier, so Jesus' message did exactly the same.

An orthodox church came alive. A cold church thawed. A church committed to routine became spiritually sensitive. A church committed to rules-keeping became committed to life and love.

They *remembered* how sweet things used to be, *repented* of their spiritual apathy, *returned* to the good deeds for which they had been saved, and *renewed* their "first love" passion for their Savior.

And that, my friends, is the story of the church at Ephesus.

It is a remarkable work of ups and downs, revivals followed by rebellions, and the gracious touch of God that softens hearts and renews spirits.

Please join me in giving thanks to God for the life-changing power of His message in Ephesus!

TO NORTHWEST COMMUNITY CHURCH

The story I've just told (with some creative license) of the story of the church at Ephesus is the story of every church. At a more personal level, it's the story of every Christian.

We hear God's message and respond in faith and obedience. This leads us to an experience of the joy of the Lord.

Then, over time, the exuberance wanes. The passion subsides. Lethargy sets in. There is spiritual apathy and the "bad old ways" return.

But God sends His message again. We know it is for us and we receive it. The good seed of the Word penetrates and does another good work in our hearts. We are revived and renewed.

Only you know where you are today, spiritually speaking.

It may be that you have heard God's Word and are walking in it. You're not following Jesus perfectly, but you're on a great track of faithfulness.

Or it may be that you, like the church at Ephesus, have *lost* (think of losing an expensive item you misplaced and are frantic to find it) or have *left* (think of abandoning a close friend) your "first love".

If that's you, the need of the hour is repentance.

And for all of us who are here today in that place, I will pray that God will kindly lead us to repentance that bears fruit for our Savior.