

# Lesson 4 | June 25, 2023

## The Gospel Makes a Difference

**Study Text:** Acts 17:16–34; 19:11–41

**Central Truth:** The gospel has the power to radically change the hearts of people and, by extension, communities.

### Key Verse: Reference

Many of them [who believed] also which used curious arts brought their books together, and burned them before all men: and . . . the price of them [was] . . . fifty thousand pieces of silver (KJV).

A number of them who had been practicing sorcery brought their incantation books and burned them at a public bonfire. The value of the books was several million dollars (NLT).

### Learning Objectives

- Students will examine how Paul's witness of the gospel confronted the idolatry and witchcraft of his audience.
- Students will realize the power of God to meet every challenge in their lives.
- Students will confidently witness to others of God's superiority over all false "gods."

## Introducing the Study

**Say:** How powerful is the gospel of Christ? Does it offer the hope of heaven but leave us to struggle through this life on our own? The first Christians discovered that God's power made available through Christ was able to meet every need—both for the believers and for the ones they would reach.

### Opening Activity—Real Change Is Possible

*Ask.* How believable are weight loss ads with their bold claims of "before and after"—complete with photographs? Have you ever been disappointed after trying a "wonder" product or system? (Allow time for responses.) It's easy to let ourselves believe we can purchase a quick answer to our problems. Real change is possible, but it seldom comes from the latest gimmick or trick. More often it comes from committing ourselves to an answer we've known all along.

**Say:** Real spiritual change happens when people accept God's plan of being born again through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And believers continue to change as the power of the Holy Spirit moves through their lives to continually transform them. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

The first people to receive the message of forgiveness and transformation through Jesus Christ were Jews. They had been brought up under the Old Testament Law and sacrificial system, which pointed to Christ. Later, Gentiles raised in an atmosphere of

false religion began to receive the gospel of Christ. In each case, it was the same powerful message that brought radical transformation. The gospel works today just as powerfully for all who will receive it in faith, no matter their spiritual history.

## **Part 1—Gospel Ministry in a Difficult Place**

### **A Strange New Message**

Acts 17:16–21

**Say:** When Paul waited for his companions in the Greek city of Athens— known in that day as a center of learning—he was “deeply troubled” by the prevalent idolatry he saw throughout the city (Acts 17:16, NLT). Paul carried a new message: Eternal life was available through the one true God. (Share your highlights from the following text.) (Share your highlights from the following text.) √ (***Play the video available at [RadiantLifeCurriculum.com/Adult](https://www.RadiantLifeCurriculum.com/Adult)***.)

After visiting the city sites, including the Parthenon atop the famous limestone hill called the Acropolis, Paul went to the synagogue, reasoning with both Jews and God-fearing Gentiles (verse 17). These Gentiles believed in one God and respected the Law and its moral and ethical teachings, but they had not become full converts and been circumcised.

Paul also spoke in the marketplace each day “to all who happened to be there” (verse 17, NLT). As the center of life in Greek cities, the marketplace was more than a hub for commerce; it was a place to get new ideas (verse 21). Many students, artists, and philosophers visited Athens for this reason.

The Epicurean philosophers Paul debated were followers of Epicurus (341–270 BC), who taught that nature itself is the supreme teacher, providing feelings, sensations, and anticipations against which truth could be tested. He also debated with Stoic philosophers (verse 18), who traced their beginning to Zeno of Citium (335–263 BC), who made reason, duty, and self-sufficiency the goal of life. Members of both groups reacted to the message of Jesus and His resurrection by calling Paul a “babbling” (verse 18), literally a “seed picker” or “gossip.” This described a person who picked up bits of knowledge from others and repeated them with little understanding.

Despite their seeming contempt, they took Paul to the “high council” of Athens, also called Areopagus (verse 19, KJV). Even after hearing countless philosophies discussed in the marketplace, the Athenians found Paul’s gospel strange and alien, and some thought it involved foreign gods (verse 18). However, their curiosity proved to be an open door for Paul’s message.

***Discuss***

? How can you build upon someone's existing knowledge of the Bible and lead them to Christ?

? In what ways can believers maintain readiness to share the gospel with a variety of unbelievers?

## **God Is Creator and Judge**

Acts 17:22–34

### **Resource Packet Item 1: Springboards for Evangelism**

Distribute the case study sheet. Allow time to read the scenarios, then ask class members to describe how they would reach each person for Jesus Christ.

**Say:** Describing this “unknown” God as the one true God who created everything, Paul contradicted the Epicureans, who believed matter was eternal. Paul explained God cannot be contained in a man-made temple (verse 24). He does not receive nourishment from people and their sacrifices; rather, it is He who sustains human life (verse 25). This Creator God has superintended the history of human habitation across the earth to give people the opportunity to seek and find Him (verses 26–27). (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Paul quotes “Phaenomena” by Cilician poet Aratus (about 310–240 BC) to illustrate for his listeners that the human race is the “offspring” of God (verse 28). God created the entire human race, which became estranged from Him through sin. But He provides a way for people to be reconciled to Him. Only through Christ can each person return to God's family (John 1:12).

The fact that humanity was created by God exposes the foolishness of idolatry (Acts 17:29). Idols did not create people; rather, in the darkness of sin, people created idols. Paul appealed to his Athenian listeners to repent and forsake the idolatry which bound them (verse 30). God will one day judge the world through the one He appointed, Jesus Christ (verse 31; see 10:42). Jesus' resurrection proved the validity of this plan.

Paul's message brought a mixed reaction (Acts 17:32–34). Some denied the existence of resurrection and judgment. But others wanted to hear more, and some became believers, including two prominent citizens: Dionysius and Damaris.

We encounter many beliefs about God today, including atheism (the belief He does not exist). Peter encouraged us to be ready to explain “if someone asks about your hope as a believer” (1 Peter 3:15, NLT). As God gives us opportunities, we can defend the truth in our culture today as Paul did in his era.

### **Discuss**

? What are some false ideas about God you have heard from acquaintances or family members?

? How can you respond to these false ideas in truth and love?

## Part 2—Radical Signs of Repentance Powerful Versus Powerless

Acts 19:11–17

**Say:** God propelled His work in Ephesus by performing “special miracles by the hands of Paul” (Acts 19:11, KJV). Healing and deliverance from evil spirits happened commonly through Jesus and His followers and are promised today (John 14:12), but the “special” aspect of the miracles God performed through Paul in this case was the use of intermediary objects—handkerchiefs and aprons (Acts 19:12). (Share your highlights from the following text.)

A group of traveling Jewish exorcists—the seven sons of Sceva—tried to expel demons using the name of Jesus (verses 13–14). The demon confessed knowing Jesus and Paul, but it had no knowledge of these men (verse 15).

The would-be exorcists were not in relationship with Jesus and did not have authority to use His name to bring deliverance. The demon was not obligated to obey them and instead caused the man to brutally attack the sons of Sceva (verse 16; see Mark 5:1–5). The people of Ephesus had witnessed a great contrast: God worked through Paul to bring supernatural healing and deliverance, but those who tried to manipulate God’s power for their own purposes found themselves at the mercy of the evil power they wanted to cast out.

The name of Jesus is higher than all other names, and these events brought great honor to Him (Acts 19:17; see Philippians 2:5–11). Jesus’ name is powerful, and it is also to be respected. Using His name without the authority that comes from a right relationship with Him can lead to disaster. This happens even today when false prophets and teachers come to the forefront professing Jesus, only “having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof” (2 Timothy 3:5, KJV).

### **Discuss**

? Read Acts 2:38–39. Discuss the implications of the truth that the gift of the Holy Spirit is promised to every believer.

? What attitude should believers have when they use the name of Jesus?

## The Old Life Discarded

Acts 19:18–22

**Say:** The remarkable demonstration of Christ’s power in Ephesus—power that worked through Paul but could not be manipulated by unbelievers—touched the hearts of those who witnessed it. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Apparently, many new believers had not yet walked away from their occultic practices (Acts 19:18). Now, confessing their sins, the people of Ephesus publicly burned their books of magic spells (verse 19). The language of the passage implies ongoing action, with book after book being thrown into the fire. The value of the books equaled about one hundred fifty years' worth of wages.

We have seen similar demonstrations since biblical times when new believers would gather various personal belongings associated with their past—drug paraphernalia, liquor, etc.—and surrender them to Christ.

### **Resource Packet Item 2: Helping Those Involved in the Occult**

Hand out the worksheet. Carefully read the directions and encourage class members to perform this self-evaluation and to spend time praying with another believer or leader over areas of occult involvement.

God's supernatural demonstrations, followed by the people's response to His power and grace, were evidence of His message spreading far and wide. The word of the Lord overcame the darkness which had dominated peoples' hearts (verse 20; see Isaiah 55:11).

After this fruitful period of ministry in Ephesus, Paul was led by the Spirit to go to Jerusalem after visiting the churches he had founded in Macedonia and Achaia (Acts 19:21). His ultimate goal was to go to Rome, and he would eventually fulfill this goal as a prisoner. On this journey, he sent Erastus and Timothy (who had been with him in Macedonia and Achaia) ahead of him to Macedonia (verse 22; see Romans 16:23).

### ***Discuss***

? Why must Christians reject involvement in any form of the occult?

? What evidence do you see in your church and life of the power of the gospel?

## **Part 3—Opposition to the Gospel Idolatry Challenged**

Acts 19:23–31

**Say:** Gospel ministry stirred up confrontation between God's kingdom and the kingdom of darkness. Demons and illness had fled when pieces of cloth from Paul were placed on sick people (Acts 19:11–12). Another clash of kingdoms took place when the silversmith Demetrius's profits were threatened by Paul's gospel message (verses 23–26). (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Demetrius gathered the craftsmen who worked with him to produce silver models of the temple of Artemis at Ephesus, each containing an image of the goddess inside. (Note: Diana [KJV] is the Roman equivalent of the Greek goddess Artemis [NLT /Greek text].)

Demetrius left no doubt as to his main motivation: “Our wealth comes from this business” (NLT). He also said Paul had turned many away from idolatry, confirming that the word of the Lord was spreading in the province of Asia (verse 10).

Turning his attention to Artemis herself, Demetrius warned that the goddess could be robbed of her majesty and her temple would be regarded as worthless (verse 27). Demetrius incited rage among his fellow craftsmen, now confronted with both loss of revenue and fear that Paul would depose the goddess. This caused them to shout praises to Artemis (verse 28), and confusion spread throughout the city (verse 29).

Not finding Paul, the crowd seized his companions, Gaius and Aristarchus, and rushed into the theater, which was used not only for sports and entertainment but also for the punishment of criminals (verse 29). Paul wanted to address the mob, despite the danger to his life (verse 30). Not only did the Christian disciples prohibit him from going, but officials of the province also begged him repeatedly not to put his life at risk (verse 31).

### **Resource Packet Item 3: Danger Up Ahead**

Distribute the case study sheet. Have volunteers read the scenarios aloud.

Discuss answers to the questions, and allow class members to share like experiences.

#### ***Discuss***

? How have you seen God’s kingdom and Satan’s kingdom clash?

? In what forms might idolatry—both literal and spiritual—appear in the modern world?

## **Darkness of False Belief**

Acts 19:32–41

**Say:** In the confusion of the Ephesian amphitheater, most people “didn’t even know why they were there” (Acts 19:32, NLT). The Jews in the crowd, already suspect in the minds of their idol-worshiping neighbors, put forth Alexander (possibly the “coppersmith” Paul mentions in 2 Timothy 4:14–15) to speak to the crowd (verse 33). But the crowd recognized Alexander as a Jew and repeated the cry of praise to Artemis (verse 34). (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Not wanting to tempt the involvement of the Roman Empire, the mayor of Ephesus tried to calm the crowd. He reassured them of the glory of Ephesus as the “guardian” of the temple and image of Artemis (verse 35, NLT). The Greek word translated “guardian” referred originally to the lowest class of temple workers, but it came to be a title of honor. The mayor argued the Ephesians’ honor of keeping the temple of Artemis was not in doubt (verse 36).

Further, the mayor stated that Gaius and Aristarchus had not been charged with any wrongdoing—specifically theft or blasphemy—against Artemis and should not be subject to rash actions by a frenzied, unreasoning mob (verse 37). Rather, Demetrius



and the other craftsmen should make formal charges against those accused and settle their differences legally (verses 38–39). Finally, the crowd dispersed when the mayor reminded them of the potential danger should Rome accusing the city of rioting—a charge Ephesus could not easily refute (verses 40–41).

### ***Discuss***

? Has anyone ostracized you because of your faith in Christ? How did you respond? How should you respond?

? How did God use the presence of the Roman Empire to maintain order as the gospel spread?

## **What Is God Saying to Us?**

**Say:** Separated from the presence of God by the power of sin, people are unable to establish a relationship with Him. Because of His great love for us, God took away the penalty for our sin. He did this by sending His Son to suffer a sacrificial death on behalf of the entire human race. As the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection is proclaimed to the world, God accompanies the message with His great power. Those who accept the gospel are forgiven and made children of God. In addition, sick bodies are healed and those in the grip of evil spirits are released. It is the privilege and responsibility of every believer in Christ to share this world-changing good news with those around them.

## **Living It Out**

### **Ministry in Action**

- Take time to thank God for the marvelous change He makes possible through the work of Jesus Christ.
- Trust God to meet both the spiritual and physical needs of His children, thereby witnessing to unbelievers.
- Ask God to lead you to those who need to hear the message of His great love and power.

## **Daily Bible Readings**

Monday:

Demon-Possessed Gentile Changed.  
Mark 5:1–8, 15–20

Tuesday:

Samaritan Leper Changed.  
Luke 17:11–19

Wednesday:

Zacchaeus, a Tax Collector, Changed.  
Luke 19:1–10

Thursday:

Samaritan Community Changed.  
John 4:9–19,39–42

Friday:

Cornelius, a Roman Centurion, Changed.  
Acts 10:34–48

Saturday:

Paul, Persecutor of the Church, Changed.  
Philippians 3:1–11