



# 2023 Weekly Devotions

Week of: January 9<sup>th</sup> - 15<sup>th</sup>

Sermon: January 8<sup>th</sup>



SMYRNA BAPTIST CHURCH  
building community ◦ equipping believers ◦ serving Jesus



January 9

**Luke 9:1-2; Ephesians 2:20**

You have heard enough times by now to possibly say, “Yeah, yeah we get it already.” I am talking about our insistence on the fact that the book of Acts is to be understood as a transitory book. Yes of course, there is plenty of wonderful doctrine contained in its pages, but there is so much that is in a state of flux. Pastor Aaron addressed the transitory nature of the progression of revelation between the covenants of the Old Testament leading up to the New Covenant of the New Testament. It is vitally important that we understand the “time” in which certain events occur as well as the purpose behind what Christ is doing.

For example, in our text for Sunday’s message, there are extraordinary miracles taking place at the hands of the apostle Paul that was a result of an authority and power given to the apostles for a time and a purpose. To see this clearly, go back to Luke 9 where it is written, “And He (Jesus) called the twelve together, and gave **them** power and authority over all the demons and to heal diseases. And He sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to perform miracles” (Luke 9:1-2). This authority and power were given to *them* specifically and solely. It was in large part to verify the ministry of Christ in the same way the coming of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2 was meant to empower the Great Commission through the followers of Christ after His ascension.

It has always been God’s redemptive plan to reach the nations through His people. The power and authority given to the apostles was a miraculous and momentary jumpstart to the whole method of evangelism. God was teaching them some necessary truths for ministry as well as putting His clear stamp of approval and empowerment upon His messengers. Since it is God’s plan to reach the lost through human beings like us, it makes sense that He would need to delegate some authority to others. The work would be too much for Jesus, as a man, to reach everyone alone. The same thing still holds true today which is why we must continue reach others who themselves will join the effort to reach further still.

By the way, this does not mean that God never empowers others for special assignments for moments in time. I believe that Luke 10 demonstrates that for a season, Jesus brought others (the seventy) into the mix and empowered them to assist in advancing the good news too. In Ephesians 2:20, we learn that the apostles and their ministry should be considered as foundational to the overall building up of the “household of God.” A foundation is the part of the house that is laid once and then everything else is built on top of it. Well, in the case of the house of God, the ministry of the Apostles was that one time foundation on which everything we do rests, with Jesus being the “chief cornerstone.”

You might wonder how Paul got in on being an apostle since he was not one of the original twelve. In Galatians 1:15-17, we are told that Paul was included in, having seen Jesus on the road to Damascus, as the “apostle to the Gentiles.” There is no reason to believe that apostles were ever replaced upon their death and that the office of the apostle continues today. We believe it does not as that office was for a time and a particular purpose. So, back in our text from Sunday, the miracles that were happening at the hands of Paul are not to be considered normative but transitory for a particular purpose. Notice that the sons of Sceva (Acts 19:13-16) were not endowed with that authority and power so they were not able to perform the miracles that Paul could. They tried it in the name of Jesus but the power and calling was not there’s to use. Healing and miracles can occur today but as a result of the will of God not the authority of a person.

January 10

**Philippians 1:15-17**

It is a sad reality but a reality nonetheless that needs to be understood and avoided. That reality to which I write today is that there are people “out there” who use Christianity and the name of Jesus for personal gain who are hypocrites and false teachers. The only way to protect yourself and family from such people and their teaching is to know they exist and then be able to recognize the abuse of the gospel and the Christian faith within their so-called ministries. Folks, you must be aware that the television is full of such people. Also, just because a building is called a church and people gather there, does not necessarily make it so. It is my prayer that you will be able to recognize both truth when it is being proclaimed as well as that which is false. Know the truth dear ones so well that falsehoods stick out like sore thumbs.

In our text from Sunday, you read of an attempt made by a false teacher, Sceva, and his seven sons. There is no record of a chief priest named Sceva, so it is likely that he assumed that title for show. His seven sons witness Paul’s ministry and the miracles taking place within it and decide to take a shot at it themselves (Acts 19:13). Notice they attempt to invoke the “name of Jesus” as their magic mantra but failed miserably. As I said yesterday, these men had no calling and therefore no authority to carry out such ministries. Note too, it is most likely that they operated under the same motives as Simon the magician whom we met back in Acts 8:9-25. There we read of a man who tried to offer the apostles money for the “power” demonstrated through them for the purpose of adding to his bag of tricks. With those tricks he manipulated, lied to, and beguiled the people for his own personal fame and fortune. Peter described him as a man “in the gall of bitterness and in the bondage of iniquity” (Acts 8:23). This is the same kind of character that Sceva and his sons turned out to be. Like Paul wrote to the Philippians, some preach for wrong motives (Phil. 1:15-17).

The greatest proof that the sons of Sceva were operating independent of the presence of the Holy Spirit was the demon’s power over them. I find it rather humorous that the evil spirit responds to them with these words, “I recognize Jesus, and I know about Paul, but who are you?” (Acts 19:15). Friends, you know you are in trouble when you aren’t making enough noise for the kingdom of God for the demons to even know you exist. They absolutely knew Jesus, the news and impact of Paul’s ministry had reached the ears of the evil one, but these guys had not raised as much as an eyebrow. The devil had no concern for them in his satanic efforts to thwart the work of Christ. I wonder what he thinks of us or are we the least of his concerns?

I hope that even the consideration that there is a level of knowledge in the heavenlies related to our work or lack of it in kingdom affairs, will spur us on to more dedicated, serious, and focused efforts to push back the darkness of the evil one and work to let our lights shine before men so that they will see our good deeds and glorify our Father who is in heaven (Matt. 5:16). May it become a desire of our hearts to truly make Jesus known in our circle of influence in our lives.

Church family, we have no authority in our own strength to do battle with the evil in our world today. However, when we are indwelt by the Spirit, as all are who are truly saved, we have all that we need to work for Christ in advancing the gospel and taking back ground that the Devil has taken. We do not have the same authority that the apostles had, but we do have an authority as children of God, armed with His armor, and wielding the Sword of the Spirit. What gives us “authority” is the simple fact that we are carrying out, in word and deed, His will as His children.

January 11

**Genesis 50:20; Acts 19:17-18; Phil. 1:18**

I chose these passages for today, but the truth is that I could have chosen so many more. The idea in my heart behind a few of them is the belief that God takes even the efforts of Satan to kill, steal, and destroy and makes them useful for His glory of kingdom growth. I think if we all paused for a moment today and thought about the times when something “bad” happened in our lives, we might be able to see how that which could have been a disaster turned out to cause growth, create good change, lead to deeper understanding, and even to provide the motivation to let go of some bad things in our lives. Accepting the reality of His sovereignty in all things is a great step towards contentment and peace in all circumstances. Try to always remember that God is always at work and He often turns bad situations into good outcomes.

Of course, we’ll probably all know the story of Joseph in the book of Genesis. The young man who was left for dead by his brothers, placed in slavery by foreigners, and wrongfully put into prison by Potiphar, was the same man who God providentially placed in Egypt to deliver His people during a 7 year famine. Everything that happened in his life, although “bad” in the moment, was all part of God’s larger plan.

Paul mentioned in Philippians 1:18 that even though some were preaching Jesus for the wrong reasons and with ill-intent, God was using it to exalt Christ and to spread the gospel. Then when we think our passage from Sunday, we find that once again, Sceva and his sons were instruments in the hands of our Sovereign God. You see, it was through their failed attempts of sorcery, that “the name of the Lord was magnified. Many also of those who had believed kept coming, confessing, and disclosing their practices” (Acts 19:17-18). I can imagine us worrying ourselves sick at the attempts of bad people to mess up our ministry all the while God be planning to use their actions to further the gospel.

How did it work out for the advancement of the kingdom and for good in our text? Well, when the people saw the difference between genuine men of God and fakes, it was clear that Paul and his faith were real and had something legitimate to offer. When they saw the reality of evil spirits and their power over our flesh it frightened them to find real help. When they realized that the power that was present in Paul’s life was different and able to overcome evil spirits and disease, they were drawn to him and the truth. God opened a lot of eyes that day and drew their hearts to Himself.

Time is of the essence. We have all grown up hearing that statement and it is certainly true in most situations. We are a culture and a people who want everything right now and waiting and working for a future gratification is rather foreign to most people in our society. Our tendency is to be so caught up in the pressure of the moment that we often fail to see that the moment will pass, and an unexpected outcome may be worth the momentary trial of the current predicament. Jesus died on the cross on Friday but was back to life on Sunday. We are limited in our ability to see what God is up to so often, but what we must rest in is that He is always working (John 5:17) and He is working for good. There are plenty of times when the devil will try to undermine what we are doing, but we must stay the course, don’t wallow in the mud with the pig, and stay away from sin. As you do, God will unfold what He was up to in the first place and His plans will be accomplished and you will marvel at how Satan is no match for our God. You do your part, keep pursuing Christ, and let Him do His part.

January 12

**Matthew 3:8; Acts 19:18-19; 2 Cor. 5:17; 1 John 3:9**

Somewhere along the line in the halls of Christendom, the false teaching that you can be saved without ever changing took hold. Salvation was watered down to nothing more than repeating the sinner's prayer, getting baptized, and having your name on the church roll. Those things are, in themselves fine, but without heart regeneration resulting from the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit it is nothing more than words, getting wet, and wasted ink. What I want you to see from Sunday's text is the transformation that took place the moment they were saved. Now, before I go any further, please know that no one is perfect and every sin does not just fall away leaving you perfect upon salvation. We remain, even our being born again, children of God trapped in fallen humanity. A life of sanctification is necessary as we are slowly morphed into the image of Christ by the renewing of our minds and the work of the Holy Spirit as He uses all the means of grace.

There are quite a few texts for today's "point to ponder", so let's begin with our text from Sunday and then we will get to the rest. The sons of Sceva were exposed for their heresy and the truth of Paul's teaching illuminated. A sense of reverential fear fell upon the people and they were granted the gift of faith leading to repentance. I want you to see what Acts 19:18-19 says. Many brought their ungodly books and burned them and gave up their godless practices in the sight of everyone. Friends, when we realize the gravity of our sin and the beauty of the salvific work of Christ in His life and on the cross, we are captured by the love of God's plan of redemption. Confronted with who He was and their own godless practices, the people wanted to change, to get rid of what they recognized to be sinful in their lives. I cannot help but think that we too should be confronted with the same awareness and experience a similar reaction.

Is it too much to ask that we eliminate from our lives that which would offend and grieve the One who died for us and the One who empowers us to victory in this life? When we come to realize the absurdity of living life independent of the only One who can save us, there needs to be, there will be, change. I did not say we would change everything, but I am saying that we should change some things. You might ask me, "What should we change?" I would simply say that you should start with that which the Spirit convicts you of first. He will continue the cleaning process over your lifetime so just start with first things first. He will show you as you lean in and listen. Matthew wrote that we should "bear fruit worthy of repentance" (Matt. 3:8). That means that there should be evidence that we have repented. Remember that repentance means we have turned away from sinful actions and directions and turned to God. The turning away should render that those things "drop off" of us as we cast them away to run to Jesus.

John wrote that, "No one born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God" (1 John 3:9). Again, this does not mean that we never sin. It means that we do not habitually practice sin over and over and that we are no longer comfortable living that old life that was characterized by sin. A major part of the reason we cannot go on in sin is because of the presence of the Holy Spirit. He literally convicts us of sin and begins to take away the "joy" of sinning and replaces it with a sense of guilt and shame because we realize that it is wrong and grieves Him. He is a change agent, and He changes us when He move in. God was not joking when He said that we become new creatures once we are born again (2 Cor. 5:17).

January 13

**Hebrews 13:17**

When I consider the reality that the gospel is the power of God unto salvation (Rom. 1:16) and that genuine sanctification is a work of the Spirit in those who are truly born again, I am encouraged by what I see here at Smyrna. Far too often there exist among “Christians” the idea that nothing really changes in the lives of believers and there is no real difference between those who are saved and those who remain lost save the redeemed go to heaven when they die. In the meantime, there is little expectation for change, no passion or excitement over even the possibility of living a victorious Christian life, and an overall boredom with the whole church scene. Most people, outside of Smyrna, will not tolerate staying in church beyond 12:00 sharp and will either choose not to come or force the pastor to stay within the accepted bounds if he knows what is good for him.

Brothers and sisters, thank you for loving the Lord, His Word, and His Bride. Considering what I wrote in yesterday’s “point to ponder”, I hope that as you look around in the halls of our church, the full classrooms, and crowded sanctuary with new faces consistently showing up, that you will be encouraged as we are. Do not fail to understand that what you are witnessing in most cases is the fruit of the Holy Spirit at work in people’s lives. When I see that 90% of our Sunday School attenders remain for the worship service, I know there is a level of spiritual maturity that should not be taken for granted. Church family it is rare to have a 50% ratio and honestly most churches average around 30%. In other words, if you have a worship attendance of 300, you might have 90-100 in Sunday School and if you are doing better than average, you might hit 150. It is normal for us to have 300-350 in worship and 300-325 in Sunday School.

Now, I write this not to brag but simply to point out God’s blessings on our congregation and to elevate your expectation that where God is honored, worshipped, and the Word is held as authoritative and boldly and accurately preached, the Holy Spirit still changes lives. In our text from Sunday, we learned that where God is at work in people’s lives, they begin to put off sinful things and put on the things pleasing to God. The same thing can be seen here among you folks. More and more of you are reading God’s Word on a regular basis. As I mentioned above, more folks are involved in Sunday School than ever before. We have more people in Sunday School than we have ever had on a consistent basis. The giving is consistently higher than it has ever been. There is a deeper understanding of the value of “community” among our classes and members than we’ve ever experienced. It is truly a blessing to serve in this spiritually mature congregation. Thank you!

The Bible says in the book of Hebrews that members of a congregation should “obey” and “submit” to the leadership of the church as the leaders will give an account for how they watched over your souls (Heb. 13:17). It goes on to say, “Let them do this with joy and not with grief.” We are certainly not without challenges and moments of frustration, but to see the folks enjoying Bible study, serving among the student and children’s ministries, actively participating in worship, and genuinely enjoying one another is refreshing, encouraging, inspiring, and serves to motivate your leadership greatly. Dear ones, it is normal human nature to take things for granted once we get used to them and the “new car smell” wears off. Fight that tendency, open your eyes, and be encouraged by the changes taking place in individual lives that are more and more fully yielded to the Lordship of Christ on a day-to-day basis. God bless you family.

January 14

### **1 Chronicles 4:10**

Back in the year 2000, Bruce Wilkinson wrote a little book that quickly became the talk of the town among churches across our nation. The book was entitled, "The Prayer of Jabez" and was based on 1 Chronicles 4:10. That verse says, "Now Jabez called on the God of Israel, saying, 'Oh that You would bless me indeed and enlarge my border, and that Your hand might be with me, and that You would keep me from harm that it may not pain me.'" Now, before you run out and purchase a copy of that little book, you must know that, although it was good and helpful in some ways, it also led to some imbalances in some readers. There were statements that I would categorize as stretching truth. Wilkinson said that the prayer of Jabez was a prayer that God "always" answered as a means to unlock the blessings of God with this "key." Now, I am not meaning to dog the author; I rather like him for the most part. It is just so easy to make blanket statements that people then misunderstand or apply incorrectly and end up more imbalanced than when they started.

Nonetheless, I want to refer to that passage today to make a point for us to ponder as we head into 2023. Yesterday, I wrote on a number of indicators of spiritual maturity and health that I believe are true in relation to our church. Attendance is slowly and consistently increasing and more importantly, more of our people are involved in discipleship (Bible study). Our classrooms are full, we have run out of space, the week by week giving was higher and more consistent than ever, and there appears to be a unity that brings great joy to our corporate gatherings. Having noted all of this though, we must now move to what that means for the future.

Pastor Aaron and I attempted to cast some vision (in color) in Sunday's message. The challenges that we face with space are real. It is our heartfelt desire to continue growing and making disciples, but the fact is that we need space to do that. Our children's ministry is doing well but once again, we are out of space and classrooms are, in some cases, overcrowded. There are some options, none of them ideal right now, that would buy us some time and provide space for continued growth and the birthing of new Sunday School classes.

The prayer of Jabez from 1 Chronicles 4, was a request to God to bless them and "enlarge their borders." That was a prayer of blessing by expansion. Jabez was asking God to increase Israel's influence by growing them as His people for His glory. Church family, simply put, that is our prayer too. As God is answering our prayers, we are finding that our tent stakes need to be readjusted to accommodate the growth. The bottom line is that it takes resources to expand the borders. In so many ways, you have done remarkably well in giving and supporting the ministry. I ask that many of you might consider doing more. Some of you cannot so please don't place guilt on your shoulders that you should not carry. The widow who gave her two coins could do no more. But in many cases, there are untapped resources among us that would allow us to "expand our borders" and accommodate the blessings of God's favor.

A very doable possibility is to bring our west campus building (the old church) up to speed. The HVAC needs are significant but certainly within reason. We could relocate our youth and children's ministries, as well as some of our young adult classes and instantly have significant room for new classes and further growth. Would you pray about your part in making this happen as we reach more people for the glory of God and the salvation of those who need Jesus? Thank you in advance for all you will do to serve our King.



January 15

**Ephesians 2:2; 1 Cor. 11:28; 1 John 4:4**

Let's end this week of devotions by getting back to our text and the application for our lives. The Bible tells us that Jesus Christ came into the world with power to free men from bondage to Satan and to destroy the work of the devil (1 John 3:8). In Hebrews 2:14 it even says that Christ came to destroy the devil himself; so, his works and his person were taken care of in Christ at the cross. We can know victory over Satan only insofar as we yield to the strength that is His strength. In Ephesians 6, Paul says, "Be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might." Our only strength is in Christ, and Christ came to give us victory over the enemy.

The power then, of the Lord Jesus Christ is the only thing that can overrule Satan. Satan is the prince of this world (Eph. 2:2). He dominates it because he dominates men's understanding and he dominates men's will. Apart from Christ, men are merely natural and the Bible is clear that the natural man cannot understand the things of the Spirit (1 Cor. 2:14). There's no human magic, there's no sorcery, there's no power, there's no exorcism, there's no ritual, there is no ceremony, there is no formula that can cast out Satan, that can overrule Satan's power. Not even the Name of Jesus used as a gimmick will work, and we saw that in our passage.

Let me just make very clear this fact. The New Testament accounts of the casting out of demons revealed this: It is always a matter of authority, never of ritual. All cases of the expulsion of demons in the New Testament were on the basis of authoritative statements rather than ritual. You say, "What do I mean." I mean rather than all long, drawn-out sessions of trying to get that demon out with uses of formulas or whatever else, it was simply the statement of Christ, "Out!" And the demons were gone. Now, that was authority, not ritual. Never a formula, never an exorcism, always a word of authority. Matthew 8:16, "Of Christ it was said, 'He cast out spirits with a word.'"

So, what about us today? What do we do with those "issues" in our own lives? Again, I want to emphasize that I do not believe, and more importantly the Bible does not teach, that there is some magical method or formula to your victory over Satan and sin in your life. In 1 Corinthians 11:28 it says, "But a man must examine himself." You take care of your own life before God in the area of holiness, and demons have no access to you and thus cannot oppress you. We don't need to run around and have the demon of this or that cast out of us. We don't need to be preoccupied with all kinds of long, drawn-out sessions of the Christian exorcist using the Name of Jesus like a formula.

Beloved, back in 1 Cor. 11, Paul's point in that passage was that as you examine yourself, and you rightly respond to the sin in your own heart with confession and repentance, God forgives and restores, and you are fine. Do you understand what I'm saying? I can take care of myself. That's between God and me. Now, I may need you to rebuke my sin, but it's up to me to be honest enough to confess and repent of it. That's between me and God. How do you get rid of sin in your life? Simply confess it, turn from it, repent of it.

We, as believers, have the resources within us to have victory over Satan. John wrote, "Greater is He that is in you than he that is in the world" (1 John 4:4). You have Him in completeness in you; you have all things that pertain to life and Godliness and you're complete in Him. Well, for a non-Christian today, to get rid of a demon, he has to come to Jesus Christ. For a Christian to get rid of problems with demons, all he has to do is confess and submit to the Word and the Spirit. That's all. Our victory depends on personal commitment to the principles of holiness.