

Acts Series Part 53

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 17 April 2011

Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 0 0] I love bonfires. Sitting around a bonfire is a very sensual experience, and let me quickly explain what I mean by that. It stimulates the senses, all of the senses, the sense of sight to see, the dancing flames. There's something very fascinating about just watching a fire as it burns. There is the sense of sound, the crackling of the logs or whatever it is that's burning on the bonfire, all manner of sounds. There's, of course, the feeling of heat on your face as you approach the bonfire and feel the warmth of it. There's a smell of the smoke, again, a wide variety of smells depending on what it is that is being burnt or indeed what is being cooked there on the bonfire.

I imagine one of the reasons why the picture of a bonfire brings such happy thoughts and feelings is probably because of nostalgic associations. Maybe a great camp that we were at or a childhood friendships that you're reminded of as you think of occasions when you were sitting around a bonfire, or maybe a special place that comes to mind. Certainly that is true for me. I don't know how many of you in a measure share something of what I am saying. Well, imagine the scene. Imagine a great bonfire, and there are people standing around it, but they begin to do something very unusual.

They begin to throw on the bonfire notes of money, five-pound notes and ten-pound notes and twenty-pound notes and hundred-pound notes, and they carry on throwing these notes on the bonfire, and it's hundreds of pounds and it's thousands of pounds and it's tens of thousands of pounds and maybe hundreds of thousands of pounds. It's a very bizarre scene. I'm sure very, very different to anything we have ever experienced. It just seems totally bizarre. It's a crazy scenario that is being painted. But something very similar to that is described for us in the chapter that we've read in Acts chapter 19. Something very similar to that happened in the city of Ephesus. We've read the chapter already. We don't need to read it again, but we can read simply the verses that relate to us this scene of the great bonfire. What do we read there in verse 18? Many of those who believed now came and openly confessed their evil deeds. A number who had practiced sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly. When they calculated the value of the scrolls, the total came to fifty thousand drachmas. So, though they didn't literally burn notes of money, they burned these scrolls whose value was huge, and there they are all going up in flames in this great bonfire.

So, what is going on? This was evidently a very powerful bonfire. And notice what Luke goes on to say, which is really going to be our starting point from where we will consider this part of the chapter.

Luke goes on to say in verse 20, In this way, the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power.

[4 : 0 3] In this way, the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power. Now, what I want to do this morning is something similar to what we did a month ago when we considered the first ten verses of the chapter. Now, if you remember what we did, I commend you.

But I'll just remind you in case you don't or if you weren't present. You may recall that we started the previous sermon on this chapter by noting verse 10 of the chapter. There, Acts 19, verse 10, 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. It's a summary verse. And what we did was we said, well, that's an amazing thing that all of these people heard the word of the Lord. Let's try and work out how that happened.

And we worked backwards. And we identified the reasons why Luke is able to describe such a remarkable outcome that so many people, all of the people who lived in this province, heard the word of the Lord. And we identified why that was. We identified that there were spirit-filled disciples exercising their spirit-given gifts. We identified their boldness in so doing. We identified how they were persuasive in communing the gospel, and so on and so forth.

The point is, there was a summary of what had happened, and then we worked back to work out why it was that there was this outcome. Well, we have a similar summary verse here in verse 20.

Verse 20 also serves as a mini-summary that Luke is employing. And he says, In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power. It's possible, in fact, that Luke is actually, in some measure, repeating what he had already said in verse 10 concerning the spread of the gospel. Because we don't, or we shouldn't understand this account as being strictly chronological. So maybe he's once again emphasizing the manner in which the word of the Lord spread.

[6 : 08] The point is, he is summarizing what has happened. And clearly, the summary of what has happened is a function of what has gone before. There are reasons for this outcome. The word of the Lord spreading widely and growing in power. The question is, how did that happen? How is it that the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power? Is this not what we would long to see in our own experience here in this very city of Aberdeen? That the word of the Lord would spread widely and grow in power? Just for a moment to consider this statement, which is, especially the second part of it, a very remarkable statement. That the word of the Lord spread widely, well, that's something we've already considered on a previous occasion. But this language of it growing in power, it is a form of speech, you might say, so we shouldn't maybe weigh it down with too much significance. But if we just ponder for a moment what is being said, the word of the Lord growing in power, is that possible? Is there not in the word of God an intrinsic power that is there regardless of the effect that it has? It is powerful, it is sharper than any two-edged sword. Whether people accept it or reject it doesn't change what it is, a powerful word. But I think here clearly the reference is to the effect of the word. The effect of the word was more and more evident and powerful in transforming lives and families and communities.

This is what Luke is saying was happening. The word of the Lord was spreading widely and growing in power. Well, how did this happen? As I say, we want to, once again, work backwards and say, well, how did that come about? What is the this that Luke refers to in verse 20, in this way? The word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power. Well, the bonfire itself, this bonfire scene, it serves as an eloquent testimony of the genuine repentance of those who were gathered there. This bonfire scene was a public and powerful demonstration of men and women following Jesus, whatever the cost. And this is what causes the word of the Lord to spread widely and grow in power. Men and women being transformed and then in due course being used of God to take that message that they have appropriated for themselves, that they have been persuaded by and changed by taking it to others. In this way, the word spreads and grows in power. But how did this happen? How did it happen that these men and women of which, of whom we are told, were changed in such a dramatic way that they were willing to burn these scrolls of such great value? How did that happen? This change in people's lives, what are the steps taken or the elements that can be identified as descriptive as of what is involved in coming to faith in Jesus Christ? These men and women evidently, very evidently, have come to faith in Jesus. Their deeds declare that powerfully. How did that happen? What was involved in them coming to faith in Jesus Christ?

That is our concern this morning. A month ago, our concern was simply to establish how it was that so many people heard the good news. We didn't go beyond that. We didn't go beyond to explore the response to that. Simply that all the province heard. Now we're moving on. We're going to consider how is it that those who heard, or certainly some of those who heard, responded and were brought to saving faith in Jesus Christ.

So there's a parallel, but there is a clear distinction. In the passage, I think we can identify four elements involved in these men and women around this bonfire coming to faith in Jesus Christ.

The first thing that was necessary was that they would hear the message. Now here we won't detain ourselves because really that was what we considered in some depth not so long ago. But it's worth and it's necessary to begin there. They hear. That is really what we have in verse 17, and we'll think about it in a moment. When this became known to the Jews and Greeks living in Ephesus, they were all seized with fear, and then it goes on. So first of all, they need to hear. Secondly, we're told that they believe. In verse 18, many of those who believed. We'll think of that in a moment. Thirdly, we're told that they confess. That same verse, verse 18, many of those who believed now came and openly confessed their evil deeds. And then finally, they turn. Now the word turn isn't here, but this deliberate action of burning their sorcery scrolls is an evidence of them turning. Turning from the lifestyle that they had been engaged in to a new life, turning 180 degrees as was visually illustrated just a few moments ago with the children. So they hear, they believe, they confess, and they turn. Let's think of each of these one by one. First of all, they hear. Nobody can become a disciple of Jesus who has never heard of Jesus. That is blindingly obvious, I would have thought. The truths concerning who He is and what He has done need to be made known. And this is what is described in verse 17, admittedly in a very unusual and remarkable way. We read there, as we just have a moment ago, when this became known to the Jews and

[12 : 53] Greeks living in Ephesus, they were all seized with fear. And the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honor. When this became known, well, what is the this that is being referred to by Luke? Well, the this evidently, clearly is a reference to what had happened to the sons of Seba, these imposters who were seeking to profit from the name of Jesus, using it as a magical spell. They had seen how the apostles, how Paul in particular, in invoking the name of Jesus, did remarkable things. We're told about them there in the chapter. And they're impressed. They're taken with this, and they want to profit from it. And so we've read what it was that they did. We've read how the evil spirit very tellingly is able to respond to these imposters, Jesus, I know, and I know about Paul, but who are you? And no doubt we could spend some time thinking about these words of the demon, but we're not going to do so.

The point is that the people hear about Jesus. And not only do they hear about Jesus, but we're told that they were gripped with fear and that they held his name in high honor. There is a telling contrast between the sons of Seba who were, it would seem, or at least claimed to be religious men who cheapened the name of Jesus, who sought to use the name for their own personal profit and benefit, with the crowds, with the people who, far from cheapening the name, we're told held the name in high honor. A very telling, a contrast here within the account that we're being given. So they hear about Jesus.

Is this all that they hear? Are they limited solely to accounts of this particular incident? Clearly, this was a very dramatic incident. There is drama involved. There is violence involved. It's visibly very powerful. These men fleeing from the one they are seeking to cast the demon from, naked and bleeding. It's very visual. It's very dramatic. It's not surprising that people would hear about that. Those who saw it would tell their friends. It's a great story to tell. It's very dramatic.

Is that all they heard? Well, surely not. Surely their curiosity would have been aroused by this, and they would have sought, perhaps not all, but many would have sought out the opportunity to hear more about this man called Jesus. Some of them perhaps knew something about him already. Others, very little. Perhaps some, nothing at all. But opportunities to hear about him, there were.

We've already read how Paul daily was engaged in discussions and in discourse concerning the good news. So, opportunity there would be, and no doubt many availed themselves of those opportunities.

[16 : 17] They all were gripped or seized with fear. They all held in high honor the name of the Lord Jesus. Are these all described there in that verse? Are they all Christians?

They're not all Christians. They are those who have heard and seen something of the power of Jesus, but they are by no means all Christians. When we think of our own day and our own circumstances, it remains the case that people need to hear. They need to hear the good news.

The good news needs to become known to use the language of the verse, and that is our responsibility. Now, certainly, it's difficult to imagine similar circumstances in Aberdeen securing the audience that we read of here in this chapter. It's almost inconceivable to imagine a parallel incident catching people's attention. But it would be good for us to ponder for a moment, and we won't exhaust what we could do in that regard this morning, but just to ponder on how it is that the gospel concerning Jesus could become more eye-catching, could secure an audience. And might it be, just as it was a powerful expression of the gospel that secured an audience, is it not still true that the power of God demonstrated in changed lives, demonstrated in changed marriages and families, demonstrated in congregations of God, people who are seeking to serve God as sacrificially and in love? Is this not the manner in which today we could catch people's attention that they would hear and explore further concerning this man, Jesus? So they had heard. What about you?

Have you heard the good news? Well, I think everybody here has heard. Maybe you're impressed. These people were impressed. But that in itself is not enough. There is another element that we discover in the passage.

They not only heard, but we're told that among those who heard, there were those who believed. There in verse 18, many of those who believed now came and openly confessed their evil deeds.

[18 : 53] We're told that all were seized with fear. We're told that many, we're not specifically told that all, but certainly the suggestion would seem to be that very many were brought to hold the name of Jesus in high honor.

All were impressed in some measure, but do all believe? Now, before answering that question, we maybe need to take a brief step back and ask what do we mean by using this verb believe? What does it mean to believe?

What does it mean as it's used here in this verse, many of those who believed? What does that involve? Our confession of faith has a chapter entitled, Saving Faith, where faith or believing is said to involve two aspects.

And I quote word for word from part of that section. The first element of believing is described as believing to be true whatever is revealed in the word.

So, believing the truths concerning who Jesus is and what he has done. Believing the truths that make up the gospel. But we're told quite rightly that there is another element in believing.

[20 : 14] And again, I simply quote the words that are used in the confession. Resting upon Christ alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life.

Resting upon Christ. So, you believe the truth concerning him to be true, but then you respond to that by resting, by trusting in Jesus.

Resting upon Christ. To believe in the ordinary New Testament usage of the word, as here in verse 18, involves assent to certain truths, and it involves trust in the person of the Messiah of Jesus Christ.

So, having taken that step back to just make that point, if we return to emphasis, do all believe in this way? Well, evidently not. The verse speaks of those who believed.

Many of those who believed. The implication is clear. Not all believed, but there were those who believed. Some did. Some did believe. This is a subset, if you wish, of the all that are described in verse 17.

[21 : 24] There were those. It would seem a goodly number who believed in this way. They heard what was said concerning who Jesus is, the eternal Son of God, the promised Messiah.

They believed concerning his life and death and the purpose of it, that he died in the place of sinners, that he rose again from the dead, conquering death, that he rose to offer new life to all who would put their trust in him.

And they believed these things. They said, yes, I believe that's true. And they put their trust in him as their own Savior and Lord. They believed in Jesus.

That's another element that we have in the experience, if you wish, of these men and women gathered around this bonfire, whose coming to faith in Jesus Christ has such a powerful impact, that as a result of that, the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power.

First of all, they needed to hear, but they also needed to believe. But there's another element that we have identified here in the passage, and that is that they confess.

[22 : 34] Many of those who believe now came and openly confessed their evil deeds. Now here, as we would distinguish between these different elements, the reason I use the word elements rather than the word steps, you could be tempted to use the word steps, but steps is unhelpful because it suggests that each of these are distinct activities.

And it's a very mechanical process. But of course, many of these elements, if you wish, go together or overlap, if you wish. But we can consider them one by one for the purposes of presenting the whole picture or as big a picture as possible.

They confess. Genuine belief necessarily involves confessing. Belief as understood or as described just a moment ago, as assenting to certain truths and resting, trusting in Jesus, must involve and will involve confessing.

There can be no trusting in Jesus without confession of sin. How can you trust in Jesus as your Savior from sin if you're not persuaded that you need saving?

It makes no sense. Nobody would put their trust in Jesus as the Savior if they're not persuaded that they are sinners in need of salvation. Confession. So, believing necessarily will involve, must involve, confession of sin.

[24 : 06] Confession is a necessary element involved in becoming and indeed in being a Christian. But it is something that we must continually do.

But what does it say in this regard in the verse? Well, we're told that many who believed came and openly confessed. The question might be posed.

Why not all? Why do only many of those who believe confess their evil deeds? Are we to conclude that some of them weren't true believers because they failed to confess? Well, there's no reason to make that judgment.

Perhaps some of them had already confessed. Or perhaps some of them were not guilty of this particular sin that has been focused on. The language used in verse 18 is general. It confessed their evil deeds.

And so, it certainly could go beyond this particular sin of sorcery. But there's no doubt that the passage does suggest that those being referred to as confessing were those who were particularly guilty of this sin.

[25 : 08] And so, there's any number of reasonable explanations why not all those who believed confessed on this occasion in this particular way.

The principal point is that true faith must involve confession of evil deeds as these men and women did here in Ephesus.

It involves recognizing that we are guilty of evil deeds. And we can only recognize that in the light of God's Word and what God determines is or is not evil.

We think of these men and women. I'm sure it was the case for the vast majority of them, I would imagine, that prior to this encounter with the truth as it is in Jesus Christ, they would not even have considered what they were doing as evil.

You know, they were involved in the practice of sorcery. It was something that so many people were involved in. Everybody did it. It was acceptable. It was something that Ephesus was famous for. The majority of them, I'm sure, had no concept, no sensation, no idea that this was something that was wrong that they were doing.

[26 : 19] Maybe some did. I don't know. But I'm sure many had no such idea or no such sense that it was evil what they were doing. However, they are brought to recognize that it is evil, that it is contrary to God's intent and to God's law.

They are persuaded that what they are involved in is indeed evil and displeasing to God. And that is necessary in order that we might come to faith in Jesus Christ, that we brought, we be brought to recognize that we are sinners, that our lives are characterized by sin, by evil deeds of one kind or another.

Of course, we live in a day where even the language of evil deeds seems so quaint and old-fashioned and for that reason can be easily dismissed as unimportant.

But it is far from unimportant. If we are to become Christians, if we are to be followers of Jesus Christ, we must confess our evil deeds.

And of course, as we recognize our guilt, as we recognize our sin, as we recognize that that which in the past we thought wasn't really that serious, wasn't indeed sinful at all as far as we were concerned, as we are brought to recognize that it is a problem, that we are guilty, while we then proceed as these men and women did, to confess our sin and to seek forgiveness for it.

[27 : 46] This is what was done here in Ephesus. And so the question needs to be posed, is there something that you have done? You've heard about Jesus. You know a great deal about Jesus.

You know a great deal about who He is and what He has done. You've heard countless sermons about Him. Maybe in a measure you are impressed by Him. Maybe in a genuine way you hold His name in high honor.

You're respectful of the name of Jesus, of the gospel, of the Bible. That's all very well. It's all very good. But have you believed in Him in the sense of not only recognizing these things to be true, but of putting your trust in Jesus as your Lord and Savior?

And in so doing have you done this that is necessary? Confessed your sins and sought the forgiveness that only He can give.

Notice how for these men and women this was not some private matter. This was something that they did publicly. Those who had believed now came and openly confessed their evil deeds, that all might know the decision that they had taken, that all might know that there was a change in their lives, that they were now followers of this man called Jesus.

[29 : 03] That brings us to the final thing that I want us to notice this morning about these men and women gathered round this bonfire. These men and women whose change is instrumental in bringing about what Luke describes in verse 20, in this way, the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power.

And the final element I want us to notice is that they turn. Again, these different elements are intertwined, I suppose, would be one way of putting it.

But confession, the element we've just been thinking about, confession is largely a verbal activity. Indeed, the Bible speaks of confessing with our mouth.

Now, be that privately to God as we, before Him, confess our sin and seek forgiveness, be it publicly as we do on occasion. For example, in the taking of vows, and we confess to believing certain truths.

It's a verbal matter, largely. But genuine confession with our mouth must be accompanied by turning with our feet, if we can put it that way.

[30 : 14] There must be that change of direction. There must be concrete action to put aside sinful behavior and move in a new direction. And this is what we witness so dramatically at this bonfire in Ephesus.

See, there they are, these believers gathered around a bonfire. Now, what do you expect believers around a bonfire to be doing? Maybe singing, Shine, Jesus, shine, or Kumbaya, my Lord. That's what believers do around a bonfire.

But they're doing so much more than that. Around this bonfire, they are making a radical and costly break with their old lives. It's not just about singing nice choruses.

No, it's much, much more than that. Around this bonfire in Ephesus. We're told in the passage that a number of those who had confessed their sins, of those who had believed, and who had practiced sorcery, brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly.

And then we're told the value of it, just to demonstrate the measure of commitment that this entailed. What is going on?

[31 : 28] Well, I think it's clear simply from the reading of the passage. But these scrolls that are being referred to, they're papyrus scrolls on which would be written incantations and spells that were deemed to have great power.

And they were very valuable. We're told by those who know about these things that we can still see some of these scrolls in museums in London and Paris and in different places.

From Ephesus particularly. Ephesus in particular was famous for these scrolls. They were known as the Ephesian letters. And they cost a fortune.

50,000 drachmas. A drachma, as no doubt you will be able to see at the foot of the page in your Bible, is this silver coin, equivalent to a day's wages. I won't do the maths for you, but if you just imagine, to bring it into some kind of modern context, what would a minimum wage be for one day's work in the UK?

What, eight times six? 48? 50 pounds. It's a minimum wage. 50 pounds multiplied by 50,000, you do the maths. This is serious money that is involved.

[32 : 37] The value of what is going up in smoke is huge. Now, all of this simply serves to demonstrate the genuine nature of their repentance.

It serves to illustrate not only their willingness, but their ability. These men and women, their willingness and ability to turn and leave all this behind at great cost.

And I use the terms, their willingness and ability, advisedly in the sense that this is something they would have been unable to do, were it not, for the power of God at work in their lives.

There's no way they could have done this. If somebody had simply gone to them and said, you know, this is really bad what you're doing. You really should burn these scrolls. Even if they'd been persuaded, well, maybe this is a bit bad.

There's just no way they could have done this had it not been for the power of God. As they respond to the gospel message, as they put their faith in Jesus, they are empowered to act in this way.

[33 : 39] They are empowered to repent in this manner. This repentance that is costly, this repentance that is very definitive, it's a very dramatic, definitive action that they take.

It is, of course, very public. And as we would bring these things to home, and as we would seek to consider them for ourselves, what about you?

Are you willing to repent in this manner? You are not, I imagine, a sorcerer. I can't imagine you have rolls, scrolls, worth thousands of pounds that you need to burn.

But maybe there are things you need to do that will be very difficult and very costly for you. Maybe telling the truth could be very costly for you.

And you know what it is, that truth that you're hiding, that you're seeking to just push to one side, to tell the truth will be very costly. But genuine repentance will involve you being willing to pay that price.

[34 : 47] Maybe doing the right thing in a relationship that you are in, that's going to be costly for you. Maybe it's forgiving somebody. That's going to be very difficult, very costly for you.

Maybe it is to do with material possessions. Maybe it is sacrificing, being able to secure greater income or more possessions in order to serve God in a particular way.

Now, that may not be true for all of you, that that is what is being asked of you, but maybe for some it is. And no doubt we could multiply the examples of how genuine repentance will be a very costly matter.

And yet, well, worth it. What is the result of this genuine repentance and the part of these men and women round the bonfire at emphasis? Well, we're told, and we simply repeat what we've already been stressing on more than one occasion.

Luke gives us the result. The result is described there in that verse 20. In this way, the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power.

[35 : 53] And so I would encourage you, you who have heard about Jesus, that you would believe in Jesus, that you would confess your sins, that you would seek the forgiveness that only He can give, that you would turn around and repent and walk in a new direction, live a new life, life to the full in the service of Jesus Christ.

Great benefits for yourself and great benefits for the cause of the gospel, as you and others would repent, and so the word of the Lord would spread widely and grow in power.

May it be so. Let us pray.