

Introduction

There is a science fiction drama my wife and I have been enjoying. It's called "For All Mankind". It has a brilliant premise. The show is in season four and began with humans landing on the moon and then establishing a lunar station. In the show humans set foot on and begin building a colony on Mars in the early 2000s.

What is interesting about the show is how different it is from actual history, yet how similar. Because of the pursuit of space, technology in the show advances somewhat more rapidly. Computers and cell phones become much more common much earlier in history because of the technological advances pushed by the space race between the United States and the Soviet Union.

This is where the brilliance of the show comes from: its point of divergence stems from a single change in actual history. The father of the Soviet space program, Sergei Korolev, died in 1966 during an operation quite unexpectedly. The show begins with the premise that Sergei did not die and becomes the first human to walk on the moon in 1969—shortly before the United States.

In this fictional timeline this sets off a space race between the two countries as both try to establish supremacy in space by designating vast budgets to that end. What is fascinating to me is all the changes the show introduces are quite logical and are not far-fetched, even as they depend on one single change to real history. It's a great "what if" scenario. What if he had actually survived? How many things about our lives today would be different?

We can ask similar questions of just about anything. Where you would be if you had not met that one person who influenced you in school? Where would *I* be if you had not married your spouse? How different would life be if you had taken that *other* job all those years ago or if you had gone to a different college or if you had chosen a different line of work? What if you had settled on a different church when you were searching for one? Life for all of us would be different.

Today we come to Paul's letter to the Ephesians. In this letter we discover God has the answers to the *cosmic* what-if questions, for his plan for the world is still being worked out uninterrupted by hostile forces that fight against it. The truth is God does not have a Plan A, for a Plan A implies a Plan B and God's plans have no contingencies. There is simply the Plan. While his plan incorporates human will and human decisions, no forces of evil can stop God from being God and doing with his world what he plans to do.

To begin our series in Paul's letter to the Ephesians, we turn to the book of Acts. As one does...

^{Acts 19:1} And it happened that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the inland country and came to Ephesus. There he found some disciples.
² And he said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?"
And they said, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit."
³ And

he said, “Into what then were you baptized?” They said, “Into John’s baptism.”⁴ And Paul said, “John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus.”⁵ On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.⁶ And when Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking in tongues and prophesying.⁷ There were about twelve men in all.

⁸ And he entered the synagogue and for three months spoke boldly, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God.⁹ But when some became stubborn and continued in unbelief, speaking evil of the Way before the congregation, he withdrew from them and took the disciples with him, reasoning daily in the hall of Tyrannus.¹⁰ This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.

¹¹ And God was doing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul,¹² so that even handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched his skin were carried away to the sick, and their diseases left them and the evil spirits came out of them.¹³ Then some of the itinerant Jewish exorcists undertook to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, “I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul proclaims.”¹⁴ Seven sons of a Jewish high priest named Sceva were doing this.¹⁵ But the evil spirit answered them, “Jesus I know, and Paul I recognize, but who are you?”¹⁶ And the man in whom was the evil spirit leaped on them, mastered all of them and overpowered them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded.¹⁷ And this became known to all the residents of Ephesus, both Jews and Greeks. And fear fell upon them all, and the name of the Lord Jesus was extolled.¹⁸ Also many of those who were now believers came, confessing and divulging their practices.¹⁹ And a number of those who had practiced magic arts brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all. And they counted the value of them and found it came to fifty thousand pieces of silver.²⁰ So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily.

Acts 19:1–20

Ephesus

Paul led a ministry team. He did not plant churches by himself. While he was the apostle and was the primary preacher/teacher of the work, he did not do it by himself. There was a group of men and women who prayed and taught and preached the gospel and organized meals and travel plans. They helped with communication and took care of the various expenses. So often when we read through a book like the book of Acts, we gloss over the very ordinary realities of life and ministry in the first century. Paul had a team, often a large team, and each team member had his or her role to play.

In verse 1 Luke says “and it happened” that while Apollos was at Corinth Paul went to Ephesus. Apollos wasn’t in Corinth by himself and Paul wasn’t in Ephesus by himself. In chapter 18 Paul first visited Corinth and found a Jew named Aquila, with his wife Priscilla. They were new to Corinth as they had lived in the city of Rome but all the Jews had been forced out of the city by the emperor. They happened to land in Corinth. Paul stayed with

them as they were all skilled tentmakers. In Corinth Paul worked an ordinary job with these ordinary people and engaged in ordinary ministry in the synagogue.

After launching a new church there and setting some things in order, Paul left Corinth and took Priscilla and Aquila with him. They ended up in Ephesus. As was his custom Paul went into the synagogue and began to preach and teach about Jesus from the Scriptures. We read this:

Acts 18:20 When they asked him to stay for a longer period, he declined. ²¹ But on taking leave of them he said, “I will return to you if God wills,” and he set sail from Ephesus.

Acts 18:20–21

In chapter 19 Luke says, “And it happened...that Paul came to Ephesus.” Initially it was not Paul’s plan to stay in Ephesus unless it were God’s will that he should return. This is quite interesting as in chapter 16 we’re told that Paul wanted to go into Asia but was forbidden by the Lord:

Acts 16:6 And they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia.

Acts 16:6

Asia here is Asia Minor, not India, China, Korea, Russia, etc. Some time later, after planting the church in Corinth and spending time in Caesarea and Antioch, and then traveling through Galatia, he returned to Ephesus. Whereas the Lord had initially said, “No” to Asia, the time was right for Paul to return.

Ephesus was the fourth-largest city in the empire. It was a city of about 250,000 people. It was a port city so it was an important place for shipping. It was also the official Roman government seat for Asia Minor. It was a religious center as it had the great Temple of Artemis—one of the Seven Wonders of the World. Her temple complex was so massive the temple to the emperor Augustus was *inside* the complex! The massive temple to Artemis was a significant source of income to the region as it brought tourists from all over, tourists who would need a place to stay and who would need places to eat and who would buy souvenirs—lots and lots of souvenirs. Don’t misunderstand: these souvenirs were idols.

Ephesus was a center for magical arts in the ancient world. It was baked into the culture of Ephesus and Asia Minor. Magical amulets were everywhere, with magic words written on them. These, too, were a significant part of the local economy. Magic books and magic trinkets were everywhere.

Some time before, Paul had wanted to go to Ephesus to preach but the time wasn’t right so the Spirit of God prevented him. Later, the Spirit allowed him to go to Ephesus where he was able, for a short time, to preach the gospel in the synagogue. Then, finally, Paul was allowed by the Spirit to set up shop in Ephesus and begin preaching, with the goal of planting a new church in this important city in the empire.

Disciples

When Paul arrives in Ephesus Luke says he found some disciples. He doesn't immediately say disciples of whom. We don't know if they're Jews or Gentiles. They're not in the synagogue so it's likely they're not Jews. Paul recognizes something about them and so he asks some probing questions—probing, but not *leading*. In verse 2 he asks whether they received the Holy Spirit when they believed. They were expressing faith in God, but saying one believes in “God” doesn't mean all that much.

If they were Jews, they should have known about the Holy Spirit for the Spirit of God was central to the new covenant promises. Rather than law written on stone, in the new covenant God's people would receive his Spirit and his Spirit would cause them to become like Jesus. When Paul asks these disciples if they received the Spirit, they say they haven't even heard of the Holy Spirit. It is clear, then, they do not have faith in Jesus.

Paul asks a further probing question. They are, after all, *disciples*, who have been baptized. He asks into what they were baptized. They were baptized into John's baptism. Paul immediately recognizes the problem. Not only do they not have faith in Jesus, they don't even know *about* Jesus! Apparently they heard the message of John the Baptist, but only the part about repenting. Paul fills in the rest in verse 4.

He tells them John baptized with a baptism of repentance, but they missed the part where John told the people he baptized to believe in the one who was coming. Those who heard John's message of repentance and his message of the coming of Jesus and were baptized, did so in light of the coming of Jesus. Their baptism was a Christian baptism even before the death and resurrection of Jesus. Through faith in Jesus their baptism crossed space and time and united them with Christ. The problem with these “disciples” in Ephesus is they've never heard of Jesus, which means their baptisms had nothing to do with Jesus and so they had not received the Spirit.

It's important to note that for Paul, being a Christian and receiving the Holy Spirit are one and the same. To be a Christian is to receive the Spirit and to receive the Spirit is to be a Christian. Their “baptisms” weren't true baptisms for they were not done in view of the coming of Christ. It is the absence of Christ in the baptism that rendered it little more than getting wet.

In verse 4 Luke summarizes what happened. They heard the gospel of Jesus and trusted in Jesus and so Paul baptized them into Christ. Paul was baptized into Christ after his encounter with the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus. The other apostles had all received John's baptism, but they had received John's baptism in light of his proclamation of Jesus. This is why they were not baptized again after the resurrection of Jesus.

At the end of chapter 18 Apollos came to Ephesus before Paul had returned there and was preaching and teaching Christ. However, he was missing a lot of details! He apparently did not know much about Jesus after his resurrection, including his command to baptize believers in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Priscilla and Aquila took him aside and “explained to him the way of God more accurately”. They did not baptize Apollos, for while his knowledge of Jesus was deficient, he knew Jesus. Therefore his baptism, though deficient in his own understanding, was a Christian baptism.

After baptizing these disciples of John who heard the gospel of Jesus and believed, Paul laid his hands on them and they began to demonstrate the presence and activity of the Spirit.

Luke emphasizes there were about twelve *men*. He doesn't use the generic word for men, which could mean "people". He specifically indicates there were about twelve adult *males*. Presumably, then, there were women as well. This is a sizable group of people who had been doing the best they could with the limited knowledge available to them. Paul comes along with the fullness of the gospel message and God does an amazing work and Paul and his team have a core group to form a new church.

Lengthy Ministry

With this initial ministry success, Paul enters the synagogue as he had done some time before, and this time he plans to stay. Whereas he originally was prevented by the Lord and later was limited in the time he could spend there, now he's able to stick around. He enters the synagogue and begins opening up the Scriptures and showing the people how they point to Christ.

In verse 9 Luke tells us some became stubborn. Rather than listen to Paul they refused to believe in Jesus and began speaking evil about Paul and the gospel in the synagogue. As a result of this Paul left the synagogue, taking the Christians with him, and rented the Hall of Tyrannus. This was a public venue where lectures and instruction took place. Paul and his ministry team operated in this space and no doubt the new church in Ephesus worshiped together there on Sunday mornings.

Luke says this went on for two years, with the result that "all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks". Many people were repenting and believing in Jesus. The gospel of Jesus was taking root in Ephesus, the fourth largest city of the empire.

In verse 11 he explains the work God was doing. He says *God* was doing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul. *Paul* was not doing the miracles, even though it was by his hands. *God* was doing extraordinary miracles. If even a handkerchief touched Paul and was carried to the sick, not only were they healed, the demons oppressing them were cast out.

We know from John 4 where Jesus heals the official's son without being physically present with him that Jesus does not need to be physically present to heal. Neither did Paul! God was working through Paul and was doing such an incredible work in Ephesus that people were being healed and demons were being cast out and people were believing in Jesus.

As you can imagine some thought this was a good time to get in on the action. Some Jewish exorcists recognized the power of the name of Jesus over evil spirits and began to try to cast out demons. Notice what they say, though, in verse 13. They would say to the demons, "I adjure you", or "I command you *by the Jesus whom Paul proclaims*". They weren't proclaiming Jesus; Paul was. They were essentially saying, "Hey, demons...*what he said.*"

When we read what happens next, it sounds pretty comical to us. Seven sons of a Jewish priest were doing this, referring to Paul's message as the reason for casting out demons. They were using this as some sort of magical incantation, as if just saying the words were enough to cast out demons. The demon spoke to them in the house where they were and said he knows who Jesus is and he recognizes Paul, but who are they?

Then the man possessed by this evil spirit attacked these seven men and whooped the snot out of 'em. He beat 'em so bad he stripped off their togas and they fled the house naked, bloodied and bruised. Some of you may remember the exorcism we experienced a few

years ago. That was quite the experience without the violence! Again, this scene may sound comical but neither Luke’s audience nor those in Ephesus would have been laughing.

Remember they swam in the waters of magic, and of spiritual powers that manifested in this world. In verse 17 this incident became widely known throughout the city of Ephesus, both Jews and Greeks, and see what their response was? “And fear fell upon them all”. But listen: it wasn’t fear of the evil spirit, but an incredible reverence for the Lord Jesus. Look at verse 17 again.

Acts 19:17 And this became known to all the residents of Ephesus, both Jews and Greeks. And fear fell upon them all, and the name of the Lord Jesus was extolled.

Acts 19:17

The name of the Lord Jesus was *extolled*. It was *caused to be large*. The impact of this scene and of Paul’s ministry in Ephesus is Jesus was being made much of. As Dan said last week, Jesus was being given weight. People recognized his power and his glory.

In verse 18 many of these new Christians recognized the folly of their former way of life and in an incredible display of public repentance, those who had once participated in the so-called “magic arts” brought their books of magic out and burned them publicly. Luke says the value of the books came to 50,000 pieces of silver.

Fifty-thousand pieces of silver is about what 150 people working for an entire year would earn. The median income today for those who work full-time and are between 45–54 years old is a little over \$61,000. This means, roughly, that over *nine-million dollars worth of magic books* were burned that day in a display of repentance and faith in Jesus.

Sure, they could have sold these books and funded a lot of ministry, yet it was better to burn that money than to allow all those magic books to remain in circulation. Luke doesn’t mention any of the amulets or idols that would have been destroyed as well.

Notice that Luke doesn’t say Paul required this. He doesn’t say the church required this. These people, as an expression of their love for the Lord Jesus and their submission to him, gladly brought their books and burned them of their own free will, though it cost them a great deal of money.

I know a man who had a fantastic library. He’s an elder and his library was filled with reference works and theological works. I have a decent library and it’s just a small fraction of what his was. *Was*. The Lord gently revealed to him his library had become an idol. He loved when people were shocked by his library and sheepishly asked if he had read *all those books*. As an act of repentance and a demonstration that he rejected the idol he had made, he threw most of those books into the trash. He could have sold them. He could have given them away. For him, true repentance had to cost him so he threw them into a dumpster. Only the Lord can lead a person to this sort of costly repentance.

Fingerprints

Paul’s work in the city of Ephesus is likely his most fruitful. As we will see in the coming weeks, the impact of the gospel of Jesus on the city was profound—both positive and negative. Lives were changed as men and women turned from their idolatry and their immorality

and their sorcery and greed and laziness and lust and whatever else the Lord Jesus saved them from, and lives were changed as men and women rejected the gospel and became more fervent in their opposition and hostility to Jesus and his people.

We see this opposition in the synagogue. When Paul first visited Ephesus it was a brief visit and the synagogue pleaded with him to stay longer. When he returned for that longer stay, “some became stubborn and continued in unbelief”. This changed their lives as no longer were they living in ignorance; they were living in open hostility to Jesus and his people.

The result of this was Paul moved out of the synagogue to a much larger venue and his ministry expanded. It continued “so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks”. What a ministry! The power of the gospel was so evident that in an act of repentance many burned millions of dollars worth of material that was evil in the eyes of the Lord. That they did so willingly and of their own accord demonstrates the power of the gospel.

Why was this ministry so successful? What makes any ministry successful? *Fingerprints*. Or as Dan likes to say, all the “just so happens” things. God’s fingerprints are all over this ministry in Ephesus. Think back to what I said earlier about Paul’s desire to go to Asia in the first place.

In Acts 16 Paul is on his second missionary journey. As I said, he’s never alone in ministry but is always part of a team. In Acts 15 he and Barnabas went their separate ways, with Mark staying with Barnabas and Silas staying with Paul. There were others with them as well. In chapter 16 Paul and his team end up in Derbe and Lystra—cities in Galatia. He came across a remarkable young man named Timothy, who was likely still a teenager at the time. Paul had Timothy join his ministry team and travel with them.

Paul wanted to preach the gospel in Asia, but as we saw, the Holy Spirit forbade them from going to Asia.

^{Acts 16:6} And they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. ⁷ And when they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them.

Acts 16:6–7

They were forbidden from preaching in Asia so they went around Asia. Luke says they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them. Bithynia is also in Asia. For some reason the Lord did not allow Paul and his team to go into Asia and preach the gospel. Why? Paul has a vision one night and knew he was being called to Macedonia. They went there instead of Asia.

Paul and his team continued traveling and preaching and planting churches, but not in Asia. Some time has passed. We get to Acts 18 where Paul has left Greece and goes to Corinth.

^{Acts 18:1} After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. ² And he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. And he

went to see them, ³ and because he was of the same trade he stayed with them and worked, for they were tentmakers by trade.

Acts 18:1–3

Here's where we really begin to see the fingerprints of God. *It just so happens* that when Paul arrives in Corinth he meets a man named Aquila who is there with his wife Priscilla. We know from this text and from history that the emperor had kicked all the Jews out of the city of Rome. Aquila and Priscilla were Jews and it just so happens they went to Corinth. They had only recently arrived in Corinth when Paul *just so happens* to arrive in Corinth.

It just so happens that they were also tentmakers like Paul so Paul worked with them making tents. They would work from early morning until early afternoon. After this Paul—and they!—would engage in ministry by preaching the gospel of Jesus every day and especially every Sabbath in the synagogue. Soon Silas and Timothy rejoined Paul in Corinth and now Aquila and Priscilla have joined his team, *having recently arrived from Rome*.

After planting a church Paul leaves behind the bulk of his ministry team but took Priscilla and Aquila with him back to his home church in Antioch. After being there for a time they set out again.

Acts 18:19 And they came to Ephesus, and he left them there, but he himself went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews. ²⁰ When they asked him to stay for a longer period, he declined. ²¹ But on taking leave of them he said, “I will return to you if God wills,” and he set sail from Ephesus.

Acts 18:19–21

Luke doesn't say why the Spirit of the Lord is now allowing them in Asia, but *it just so happens* that after being forbidden to go to Asia Paul ends up in Corinth where *it just so happens* that Priscilla and Aquila had recently arrived from Rome. The timing is extraordinary! Then and only then is Paul allowed to go to Asia with Priscilla and Aquila. Luke says he leaves them in Ephesus to continue the ministry, for Paul was only to be there for a short time. The Lord only allowed him in Asia at this time for a short while. Then someone else shows up.

Acts 18:24 Now a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was an eloquent man, competent in the Scriptures. ²⁵ He had been instructed in the way of the Lord. And being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John. ²⁶ He began to speak boldly in the synagogue, but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately. ²⁷ And when he wished to cross to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him. When he arrived, he greatly helped those who through grace had believed, ²⁸ for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the Scriptures that the Christ was Jesus.

Acts 18:24–28

Why was Paul only allowed in Ephesus briefly after being forbidden from going to Asia altogether some time before? *It just so happens* that Paul needed to meet Priscilla and

Aquila who were able to teach Apollos and better equip him for ministry and *it just so happens* that Apollos arrived in Ephesus shortly after Paul left Priscilla and Aquila there. After receiving his seminary education from this couple Apollos is sent off to do ministry elsewhere, now properly prepared for it.

Then, *when the time was right*, Paul returns to Ephesus where he rejoins his ministry team and engages in the most fruitful ministry of his life. Luke says in verse 1, “And it happened that while Apollos was at Corinth...Paul...came to Ephesus”. *It just so happens* that Paul was away long enough for Apollos to be trained and equipped. Now that Priscilla and Aquila are free to return to Paul’s team, Paul arrives in Ephesus where the Spirit of Jesus allows him to remain for years, with the result of all these “it just so happens” moments that everyone in Asia hears the gospel and the name of Jesus is extolled.

Application

Luke doesn’t record a lot of the ordinary stuff of life. He doesn’t mention the travel plans, whether paying fare for a ship to cross the Mediterranean or waiting for a caravan of merchants and such with whom they could walk for greater security when traveling over land. He doesn’t mention the nights sleeping under the stars around a fire or finding an inn that could house his entire ministry team. He doesn’t mention what they ate or did with their free time. He also doesn’t mention the frustration they would have felt.

In chapter 16 it is clear Paul *wanted* to go to Asia but the Spirit prevented him. This likely means he was making attempts to plan to go to Asia. I have zero interest in visiting Chestnut Ridge, New York. (I found a website that lists random American cities!) I don’t know anything about it other than it’s in Rockland County, New York. I highly doubt the Lord would extend any effort in preventing me from going to Chestnut Ridge, New York, if only because I have no interest in going. (Well, maybe now I do...a little.)

Paul wanted to go to Asia in chapter 16 but was prevented by the Lord in some way. Paul was a man who trusted Jesus, yet surely Paul was frustrated by this. It’s unlikely the Lord said to him, “Don’t worry, Paul. You can’t go there *now* but soon you will visit for a time and then leave for a time. When you return—and you *will* return to Asia—you will have the most fruitful ministry of your life.”

The Lord usually does not give out this sort of information. Paul and his team tried to go to Asia and were prevented. They determined it was the Lord who was preventing this. Surely they were frustrated. Surely they were confused. Surely they asked the Lord why and did not receive an answer. They were being called to walk by faith, trusting the Lord knows what he’s doing.

It is nearly always the case that we see more clearly in retrospect. It’s not hard to imagine Paul sitting around one night near the end of those years in Ephesus as he’s seen the church grow there to be 250–300 people, talking to his ministry team, including the new elders in the church—men he no doubt spent time training. Surely he reminisced with them the “early days”—just two years prior—about how God had orchestrated all the details. It’s not hard to imagine him saying, “Guys...I didn’t think this church would ever happen! I had no idea why the Lord didn’t let me come earlier...but I’m glad he didn’t. This is better.”

The truth is we rarely live in retrospect. We’re still in the middle of our story. Most of our story is still to be told. Even those of us who have lived more of our story cannot see

the full story arc, for *they're still in it*. Even when we can see more of our own individual stories, we cannot see others'.

How often we find ourselves wanting to go to Asia, to do some ministry, to see something incredible happen with those we love, only to be “prevented” from going there. How often do we see God working in the lives of others and we long for that to be in our lives. Or we see what God has done with someone else’s loved one and we wonder why God isn’t doing that with ours. We want to be in Ephesus and but we can’t go there, and we have no guarantee this is a temporary delay.

We have no real way of knowing who has to first go to Corinth for us to cross paths with and then to move to Ephesus where someone else has to come while we’re not there. As much as we might think we’re the center of God’s plans, the truth is he often reaches those we love through other people. *Paul didn’t train Apollos*, after all. It wasn’t Paul’s plan to meet Priscilla and Aquila and to leave them in Ephesus where Apollos would arrive after Paul had left.

Sometimes God needs to move you out of the way as he moves other people into position to accomplish his purposes through them, even as he works to do things in and through you. It may feel like you’re stuck where you don’t want to be, prevented from going where you want to go.

We tend to feel very unnerved when we cannot control things. We tend to struggle when we don’t know things. We must walk by faith, trusting the Lord Jesus. We trust he is, as Jim so helpfully reminds us, the First Mover, not the First Responder. The Lord doesn’t respond and react to events; he’s moving history toward his intended purpose. We can trust him with all the details, including those we cannot know.