

God works in Ordinary Places

Acts 18:19-21:26

August 3, 2025

Prayer

Every time I read a story in the Bible, I have to consciously overcome a long-held bias. It is the kind of bias that can cause me to see things that aren't there or miss things that are. My bias is to think that these stories are special and unique. The people involved are smarter or have greater faith or exemplary courage and the places are all extraordinary.

It is a burning bush that is not consumed by the flame. It is a mountain that is capped with smoke, lightning and thunder. If the space looks ordinary on the surface, we soon learn that it is so much beyond ordinary that people erect a memorial so that others will always remember how special that place is.

When I read the Bible, I tend to expect something out of the ordinary and when I do that, I separate my own life from the story I am reading. But when I turn off that bias and slow down, I begin to see how the people are just like me and the places they visit are just like the ones I visit. And if God can use them, going through their ordinary lives as they visit ordinary places, then maybe He can use me in my places too.

Last week Michelle helped us see how God uses common people like you and me to do His extraordinary work. Today we take it the next step to consider how God uses ordinary places too.

When I use the word ordinary I am thinking of those locations that are commonplace, standard or normal. Coffee shop. Grocery store. Community Center. These are the places we pass by every day, visit often, and may even take for granted.

This morning we want to see how God uses these ordinary places as tools to deepen His people and establish His church. We will fly through a couple of chapters to see what God was doing in Ephesus.

Paul, Priscilla and Aquila left Corinth and traveled to Ephesus. We pick it up on Acts 18:19-28.

They arrived at Ephesus, where Paul left Priscilla and Aquila. He himself went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews. ²⁰ When they asked him to spend more time with them, he declined. ²¹ But as he left, he promised, "I will come back if it is God's will." Then he set sail from Ephesus. ²² When he landed at Caesarea, he went up and greeted the church and then went down to Antioch....

²⁴ Meanwhile a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was a learned man...and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue.

When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately.

²⁷ When Apollos wanted to go to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples there to welcome him. On arriving, he was a great help to those who by grace had believed. ²⁸ For he vigorously refuted the Jews in public debate, proving from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ.

Here we see the ordinary places of a synagogue and a home. Since the gospel is for Jews first and also for the Gentiles, Paul used the synagogue as his starting point. He also knew he'd find people who were prepared for his message, so he went there to test the soil and plant a few seeds. He then left Priscilla and Aquila behind.

Priscilla and Aquila met Paul in Corinth and joined him in ministry. When Paul left for Ephesus, they moved with him so they could assist Paul in his work. Paul was the rototiller who dug up the ground and scattered seed. They were the gardeners, who cared for and expanded what Paul began.

They clearly did this out of their home. And it is a reasonable stretch to say that Apollos was not the only one they invited into their lives (the church met in their home too). Whether it was for a meal or for lodging, their ordinary home became an outpost for the kingdom of God.

Based on what happened in Corinth, I am confident there is another ordinary place implied here—their place of business. They had to have a spot in the agora (marketplace) where they sold their tents, and you can be sure they brought their faith with them to work.

In Paul's day the synagogue functioned as a community center. It was a place to gather and make decisions, help the poor, or meet for religious instruction or observances. With that in mind, we could say that any group today that exists for a common purpose could be likened to an ancient synagogue.

The synagogue, home and workplace. Three ordinary places that God used to deepen His people and establish His church. Let's what other places we can find. We pick it up in Acts 19:1.

While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples...

Did you ever wonder where he found those disciples? He was actively looking, probing around and asking questions. He came upon 12 men. Where might 12 men be hanging out together? Chances are good it was a public space where others gathered.

My guess is that this was the Lower Agora, near the harbor. It was an open space used as a marketplace and gathering spot. Think Lafayette Farmer's Market. You have streets

lined with booths, people gathering in conversation. Musicians playing on the corner. You could add coffee shop or café to this list of public gathering places.

Paul found these disciples, filled in what was lacking in their knowledge of and experience with the Christ, and then likely connected them with Priscilla and Aquila and the church that met in their home. Let's jump now to 19:8.

Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God. ⁹ But some of them became obstinate; they refused to believe and publicly maligned the Way. So Paul left them. He took the disciples with him and had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. 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.

Paul returned to the synagogue and stayed there until the opposition began to hinder the work he was doing with those who had come to faith. At that point he set up ministry at the lecture hall of Tyrannus.

We don't know who Tyrannus was or why Paul chose this as the place to set up daily discussions. But we do know that Paul did a similar thing in Corinth. When Jewish opposition became abusive there Paul moved his lessons to the home of Titius Justus, a worshipper of God. Both the lecture hall and the home were a neutral location for him, a place where he could focus more on deepening disciples than on defending against attacks.

The lecture hall of Tyrannus was a formal place of instruction and learning. It could be likened to a university, college or secondary school. Paul taught here for two years until "all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord."

A long obedience in the same direction makes a profound difference.

Paul didn't write a New York Times bestseller. He didn't gather ever-increasing crowds which required him to move into larger and larger venues. He just used what he had in an ordinary place, with the people who came, to make an extraordinary difference.

I think of Sally or Lynette who spent decades teaching a specific grade in Sunday school. Common, every-day people in an ordinary place, living ordinary lives, faithfully sharing the Good News with those who came to them. They did not just touch the lives of their students. They touched the lives of everyone those students came to know or marry or parent too.

And let me just take this one step further. The people I am thinking of didn't stop. For instance, Sally McIntire taught third grade Sunday school here for more than 30 years. Every week she came to the halls of Covenant to have discussions with third graders about the hope we can have in Jesus. She now lives in a common, ordinary, local care facility. Every week she leads a Bible study. Every day she uses her wheelchair to visit other residents, holding discussions about the hope we have in Jesus.

She is not alone. I think of Bob, Marilyn, Bill, Emma, Mike, and many others who even in their older years, living with a variety of circumstances, still use their ordinary lives in their ordinary places to share an extraordinary message.

Even in ordinary places, God uses a long obedience in the same direction to make a profound difference.

Synagogue. Community Center. Home. Work. Farmer's market. Coffee shop. Café. University. School. Through what happened at Ephesus we see how God uses these ordinary places to prepare the soil, ready hearts, sow the gospel, draw people to himself, deepen their faith, establish the church, raise up workers, and send them out in his name despite opposition.

God works in ordinary places, but let's be clear here. It is not the ordinary place that prompts God to work. God is present at all places and times yet that ordinary place is just an ordinary place...until you arrive. You are God's ambassador, a flesh and blood representative of His love and message.

Let's fast forward now to Paul's goodbye to the elders. Acts 20:17-24.

¹⁷ From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church. ¹⁸ When they arrived, he said to them: "You know how I lived the whole time I was with you, from the first day I came into the province of Asia. ¹⁹ I served the Lord with great humility and with tears, although I was severely tested by the plots of the Jews. ²⁰ You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. ²¹ I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus. [this is the singular message to both groups]

²² "And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. ²³ I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. ²⁴ However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace.

You can unpack Paul's full description of how he lived amongst them the entire time he was with them, but I think we can summarize Paul's words with these: No matter who he was with or what he experienced, Paul consistently testified to the gospel of God's grace with his words, deeds and life.

Testifying to the gospel of God's grace. Christians are the only people who can do that. Having received it so that we also possess it means that we are also the only ones who can share it with others. Anyone can do good things, help the poor, counsel the depressed,

drill wells for clean water, do justly and love mercy, but only Christians can testify to God's grace in word and deed and that testimony can be given in any place.

Testifying to God's grace is much more than telling others that God loves them and has a plan for their life. It is about God's kingdom becoming available to the common person in the ordinary places of this world. While this kind of witness will bring opposition from some outside the faith, the more common experience is what we see in the closing verses (20:36).

³⁶ When he had said this, he knelt down with all of them and prayed. ³⁷ They all wept as they embraced him and kissed him. ³⁸ What grieved them most was his statement that they would never see his face again. Then they accompanied him to the ship.

The next chapter opens with these words. "After we had torn ourselves away from them...."

Testifying to God's grace in word and deed builds a unity and love within the church unlike anything found in this world.

God works in ordinary places. Jesus said, "My Father is always at His work to this very day..." (Jn 5:17). That means that, even before we get to that ordinary place, God is already at work preparing the way for us to join Him in that work.

What change might happen in your life if you began to live more expectantly? What would happen if you began to walk into a coffee shop or a business meeting or the farmer's market or any ordinary space looking for the places you can join God in the work He wants to do in that moment?

God is *in* every conversation, every decision, every moment: What is He doing? How is He working? How does He desire to meet me or use me in this moment?

If you ask the Lord to help you become more aware of the work He is doing and to become more willing to join Him in that work, He will answer that prayer. As you live expectantly, be ready to yield to do what He asks you to do.

As our King, Jesus is *over* every conversation, every decision, every moment: How would He lead me? What would He have me to say or do or be in this situation?

You are God's ambassador, a flesh and blood representative, testifying to the gospel of God's grace through your words, deeds and life. Expectant that He is at work and yielded to the work He wants to do in you and through you.

I think Eugene Peterson's translation of the opening lines of Romans 12 sheds helpful light on Paul's intent.

So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you.

God helping you, take your everyday ordinary life and all the ordinary places you go and give them back to the Lord as an offering.

I love the simplicity of God's kingdom, where people are valued for who they are and not just what they do. And where the ordinary is embraced and used in extraordinary ways.

The bread and the cup in front of us are ordinary, and yet God uses them in extraordinary ways. Paul said that when we eat the bread and drink the cup we proclaim the Lord's death until He comes. That means that sharing this meal is one way to testify to the gospel of God's grace in Christ.

Jesus is the one who gave us this meal. He is the One who said, "This bread is my body, broken for you." "This cup is the new covenant made in my blood, shed for the forgiveness of your sins." He is the one who said, "Do this in remembrance of me."

God works in ordinary places through ordinary things, and He does so through you and me. You are God's ambassador, a flesh and blood representative, testifying to the gospel of God's grace through your words, deeds and life.

As you receive the elements today, receive also the testimony. Make eye-contact with the person handing you the tray and receive from them the words they offer. Then, as you serve the elements today, testify to the gospel of God's grace. Make eye-contact with the person you are serving and speak a short phrase of truth about the bread or the cup to them.

When the bread is passed the screens will show several options for possible words you can say. The same thing will happen when the cup is passed. Feel free to use one of the phrases or let the Spirit guide you in speaking your own short phrase of truth about the bread or the cup. Ask the Lord what He might want to say to the person you are serving today and then testify to the gospel of God's grace.

Receive the testimony of God's grace. Share the testimony of God's grace, and experience the testimony of God's grace by eating the bread and drinking the cup whenever you are ready.

If you are here but have never placed your faith in Christ as Lord and Savior, we welcome you and are so glad you are here. When the tray comes to you, receive the words

you are given and then pass those words along to the person you serve. I hope you will then observe what is going on and listen to the voices speaking the words. And then ask the Lord how He views you and how He would like you to view Him.