

Study 30: The Occult and Demon Possession

Introduction

There are several places in the book of Acts where Luke touches on the occult and demon possession. Perhaps the greatest centre of such was at Ephesus.

The purpose of this study is to review the bible teaching on the subjects. There has been considerable growth in modern society away from the bible towards the occult religions, and “magic shops” are appearing everywhere.

Body of the Study

What is the Occult, and what are we talking about?

Occult practices involving knowledge

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How did demons possess men?

Does demon possession still exist?

Homework:

Read the notes as a review of the study.

- *How does the occult impact into our everyday lives?*
- *How can we help those who are involved with it to turn from their practices and obey God?*
- *In the first century, there was demonstration of the power of God over the “power” of Magic. How can we demonstrate God’s power today?*

- *Read Acts chapter 20 in preparation for next week’s study*

Notes for study 30: The Occult and Demon Possession

Introduction

Luke touches on the occult, and on demon possession in several places in the book of Acts. One of the strongest centres of such occult practices was at Ephesus.

“...When this became known to the Jews and Greeks living in Ephesus, they were all seized with fear, and the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honor. ¹⁸ Many of those who believed now came and openly confessed their evil deeds. ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power...” (19:17-20 NIV).

The power of God confronted the occult practices at Ephesus, and there was no competition. Many who had engaged in the occult practices publicly renounced their practices and beliefs, and burned their books. What were they practicing, and why? How is this relevant to us?

This study reviews the bible teaching on the subjects. Modern society has made considerable growth away from the bible towards the occult religions, and “magic shops” are appearing everywhere.

Body of the Study

What is the Occult, and what are we talking about?

The word *occult* comes from the Latin word *occultus*, which means hidden, secret, or mysterious. Throughout the book of Ephesians, Paul interweaves the contrasts of darkness and light, good and evil, God and Satan, and spiritual warfare. These ideas are discussed in the notes for Ephesians; Study 5.

More and more people are turning away from christianity, and seeking and embracing the “spirit world” through people who claim to have insight into the hidden, secret, and unknown things. In some countries of the world, occult religions (such as Voodoo) are widely practiced.

Underlying occult practice is the thought that spirits possess power and knowledge that is beyond men’s power and knowledge. By meeting certain conditions and practices, the spirits are willing to impart this knowledge and power to the “worshippers”, which will result in a benefit by receiving it – either in gaining knowledge, or protection from evil.

Occult practices involving knowledge

Astrology is the most widely practiced occult belief, with horoscopes appearing in most daily newspapers, on the radio and TV, with hundreds of millions of people consulting them daily.

The basic belief is that the position of the stars at the time of our birth influences (controls?) the events of our lives, and our destiny. There is also an underlying belief that how the stars are positioned effects even national events.

The daily and weekly horoscopes in the paper present extremely general descriptions, and can be applied to almost anyone. However those who really practice astrology go to the details of the exact time and place of their birth, and how the stars were positioned at that exact time. The astrologer claims to reveal knowledge affecting the “believer” so that he can use this hidden knowledge for his benefit. Many people including influential world leaders consult astrologers before undertaking their daily duties and decisions. This is far and beyond reading the horoscope in the daily paper over breakfast along with the cartoons.

Numerology is the study of numbers, and is often applied to numbers of things in the bible. Practisers of numerology take things like your name, and reduce it to a number to

(supposedly) derive meaning. The basic idea from this is that when your parents gave you a name that they somehow “magically” gave you a name that represents your character – or alternatively you grow into the character of whatever your name means.

We should not however *throw the baby out with the bath-water* by saying that there is no significance to numbers in the bible. For example the bible talks about the *city four square* (Rev 21:12-17); the significance of twelve as it fits into this structure – 12 apostles, 12 tribes of Israel, and the 144,000. Then of course there is the appearance of 7 on numerous occasions suggesting perfection and completeness.

However numerology goes far and beyond the simple suggestions that are underlying the appearance of these obvious symbols in the bible.

Palmistry is another occult practice by which people with *special knowledge* are able to “read” the signs written in the lines of the hands, and make predictions (“impart the knowledge”) based on their “special insight”. Supposedly there are inbred characteristics reflected on the left hand, and acquired characteristics reflected on the right hand.

There are several **other types** of occult practices that are similar in that they are *knowledge based* (ie they claim to give knowledge to the benefit of those who are practicing it). Some of these include reading tea leaves, Tarot cards, looking into crystal balls, interpretation of dreams, and looking for *omens* in the pattern or behaviour of birds and animals. Some omens might be whether a black cat crosses your path, or whether birds fly to the right or left at take off as a bad sign or a good sign.

Occult practices involving contact

Clairvoyance is a particularly well recognised practice, where someone will claim to have special powers to be able to make contact with the spirit of a dead person. Many have made prominent TV appearances. Some mediums even claim to be able to predict events before they happen.

Soothsayers claim to speak on behalf of the spirits, and to tell the listener general, or often even personal messages from the gods, or the spirits.

Seances are held where people try to make contact with the spirits of dead people directly, and often use Ouija Boards to assist the spirit making the communication.

The practice of Magic

This is not the *illusionist* magic that we are familiar with – pulling rabbits out of the hat, or sleight of hand tricks. Rather, it is the idea of having and possessing *power* that has come from another world. The tricks might very well be sleight of hand, but the person performing them is *claiming* to be able to do so because of the supernatural power that he has.

Some magic claims to be evil (black magic), and impart harm to the victim, whilst other magic is claimed to undo the harm (white magic) and do good to the victim. In both cases, the magic is performed using *magic spells* with formulae for the spells known to the magician.

The Book of Shadows is the “bible” used by the witches, and contains chants, spells, charms, etc. It is read at every meeting of the witches assembly (coven). The meetings will often discuss whether the spells are working, and plan for future activities. The coven will meet in a magic circle, with many symbolic objects, such as earth, air, fire and water placed around the circle. A string of 40 beads (or a cord with 40 knots), – the Witches’ ladder – will be placed on the table with other ritual items including a bowl for burning incense and a chalice.

In black magic, Satan is actually worshipped, and is given a higher standing than God. Animal sacrifices are made, (and sometimes human sacrifices). The rituals followed sometimes resemble the worship of Artemis at Ephesus.

Magic Charms are often worn to protect the wearer from harm, or to bring *good luck*. Books on the practice of magic now appear everywhere from bookshops to supermarkets.

Crystals are becoming popular in our society for their supposed magic and mystical properties. Someone said “*Putting the crystal next to the dog while he slept cured his arthritis.*” There are a million other versions of the supposed healing power that they bring. It may be possible that there are genuine effects from the practices, but that only raises the question as to where the power comes from. Is it from God, or Satan?

What does the bible say?

Before we get into the details, we need to observe that there were real cases documented for us in the bible. This is not just something that happens in our imagination. We have read about the case of Simon the Sorcerer in Acts chapter 8 (study 11), who used his *magical powers* to gain great prominence (and probably prosperity) in the community.

In the Old Testament, witches and sorcerers were to be put to death, and not to be permitted to live (Ex 22:18).

Worship of any *thing*, any *being*, and any *one* other than God was forbidden under the Law of Moses (Dt 5:7-9)

The heart of the matter is where our faith and our belief lies. Is it in the power of the crystals, or the power of God? In every case in the New Testament, the power of God overcomes the power of Satan that was demonstrated through the occult practices.

As christians we are called to not be involved with the occult. The Colossian christians were reminded how they were “...*translated out of the power of darkness, and into the kingdom of His dear Son...*” (Col 1:13). In the letter to the church at Ephesus, Paul reminds us that “...*we wrestle not with flesh and blood, but ... against the powers of the darkness of the world, with spiritual wickedness in high places...*” (Eph 6:12) We are at war against Satan and his practices. We are not to embrace the enemy!

Occult as a substitute for genuine religion

The power of magic is no substitute for the power of God. There are numerous examples in the New Testament where God demonstrated His power over the power of Satan. Notice a few examples from Acts:

- 8:9-24 Simon the sorcerer used magic, but was overpowered by the gospel. He recognised the true power of God, and the magic was of no comparison to it.
- 13:6-12 Elymas the sorcerer was confronted by Paul and struck blind. His power was totally overcome by the power of God. The people recognised the genuine power of God, “...*and believed, being astonished at the doctrine of the Lord.*” (KJV)
- 16:16-19 The young woman in Philippi who had a spirit of divination was exorcised by Paul, and was not able to resist the power of God.
- 19:11-20 Special miracles were done by Paul, and the Jewish exorcists tried to do similar things, but they were unable to do them. The people of the city who were engaged in occult practices recognised the true power of God, and so much so that they brought their magic spell books along and publicly burned them.

Occult beliefs and practices are often used as a substitute for believing what God has said about death and the life hereafter. Those in the first century could clearly recognise the difference. Reincarnation – living another life (or several others) will give men the hope of something beyond the grave. As christians we have that hope in Christ. Satan is succeeding in deluding many that they do not need God, and unfortunately men are ignoring the divinely inspired record of evidence that we have in the bible – and the New Testament in particular.

What about demons?

Notice some of the characteristics of demons:

- Mk 5:1-20 The demons who possessed the Gadarene gave him extraordinary physical power such that no one could control him and physically restrain him. Further, this man was possessed with many demons, not just one.
- Acts 16:16-18 The young possessed woman had the power of soothsaying, and went about perverting the truth (saying Jesus is a God, and a way of salvation, Jesus said He was the way – Jn 14:6).
- Acts 19:12 Dr Luke makes a clear distinction between demon possession and sickness (as we have previously noted). Before modern medicine, the two were often confused, but Luke recognised the difference.

The Old and New Testaments contain many examples of demon possession. The inspired writers who reported their first hand experiences did not think that these were just figments of the imagination of the “possessed” person, or just a mental illness. They reported the person’s possession by a spiritual character that was able to control the host he was living in.

There is much speculation as to where demons originated from, both from the Greek writings (such as Homer), and also the Jewish traditions. Josephus writes “Demons are no other than the spirits of the wicked, that enter into men and kill them, unless they can obtain some help against them”¹

Jesus foretold that demons face an ultimate doom in the place “...*prepared for the devil and his angels...*” (Mt 25:41). Further, Jesus viewed overpowering the demons as overpowering Satan (Lk 10:17-18).

The nature of demons is further demonstrated by what James says about them – “...*they believe in God, and tremble...*” (Js 2:19). It is clear that they are not an illness possessed by a person, but rather a person themselves inhabiting human beings. They can also inhabit animals, as Jesus demonstrated when he cast them out of the Gadarene and into a herd of swine. (Mk 5:13).

What do the early christian writers say?

Justin Martyr asserts that demons inspired Greek mythology, raised up evil men (like Simon the Sorcerer), raised heretics, and energised christian persecutions².

Origen describes them as evil, destroying men, the object of heathen worship, and used by God to punish the wicked²..

Clement of Alexandria says that they are without bodies although not absolutely immaterial – but have a shadowy and slightly sketchy shape².

All of these writers who lived close to the first century confirm the existence of demons as real beings. Many modern writers deny the literal presence of demons in the scripture, and advance many theories for them. However we have noticed that Jesus, the apostles, as well as the early writers believed in their literal existence, and did not confuse them with diseases or mental illness – on the contrary, they distinguished between them.

How did demons possess men?

The demons entered human bodies and took control of them. Sometimes (as in the case of the Gadarene), this was physical. In other cases (such as the young Philippian woman) the person

¹ Josephus, “Wars of the Jews” 8:6:3

² Quoted from Reese, p.239-241

may not have been physically inflicted, but the demons controlled what they said. In this case the woman continually followed Paul around – so in addition to control over her speech, the demons might also have had control over *where she went*.

On most occasions when demons are mentioned, they have entered into a human. Whether the person sins because of demon possession is an interesting question, and given that the demon exercises such power over the person, they are not really in control of what they are doing. We can only say that God is their judge and will decide such matters.

Does demon possession still exist?

Demons with the ability to possess and control men certainly existed in the time of Christ and for some time after. At that time it was associated with occult practices, and there is no doubt that such *practices* still occur today.

If demons do not exist today, then what caused them to cease? Many people argue for their existence, and many argue that they no longer exist. Just as the scriptures give no clear information on the origin of Satan and demons, neither do they give clear information as to their cessation.

One line of argument suggests that demons were used by Satan at the time of Christ and shortly after as a last ditch effort to stop the work of Christ, and to prevent the establishment of the church and the spread of the gospel. At this time, the miraculous gifts allowed the demons to be subdued. To follow this line of argument, Satan would still want to use demons now for the same purpose, but God does not allow it. A possible reason for this is the cessation of the miraculous power to overcome them.

The scriptures give us clear warnings concerning the occult and interaction with demons – for example the Ephesian letter, where the battle is going on between God and Satan, and we get caught up in the middle and the cross-fire.

There is no question of the cessation of occult practices with Satan. As Christians we must not associate with these practices – rather we must “...*flee from them*...”.

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