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BIBLICAL REFLECTIONS

Run Boys Run

Just a Thought · Acts 19:13–17

By John L. Wheeler

"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.' Seven sons of a Jewish high priest named Sceva were doing this. But the evil spirit answered them, 'Jesus I know, and Paul I recognize, but who are you?' 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. 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 19:13–17, ESV

It is difficult to read this account without seeing the almost comical picture. Seven men enter a house apparently confident that they possess the means to overpower an evil spirit. A short time later, all seven come running out naked and wounded. Run, boys, run!

Yet there is nothing humorous about what brought them into that house.

The sons of Sceva were itinerant Jewish exorcists. They lived in a world in which magic, sorcery, incantations, and attempts to manipulate supernatural powers were common. Ephesus was particularly associated with such practices. Only a few verses later, those who had practiced magic brought their books together and publicly burned them.

These men had apparently heard about Paul. More importantly, they had heard about Jesus. They had learned that when Paul commanded evil spirits in the name of Jesus Christ, the spirits obeyed. But rather than asking who this Jesus was and submitting themselves to Him, they attempted to appropriate His name for themselves.

Their words reveal everything: *"I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul proclaims."*

Jesus was not their Lord. He was Paul's Jesus. They wanted His authority without belonging to Him.

God had already said, *"You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain."* Exodus 20:7, ESV

Taking God's name in vain is more than using His name as profanity. It is attaching His name to what is empty, false, deceptive, or contrary to Him. The sons of Sceva were doing precisely that. They had discovered that the name of Jesus carried authority, so they hijacked His name for their own purposes.

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They are not the last to do so.

There are those who attach the name of Jesus to teachings Jesus never taught, promises Jesus never made, and practices Jesus never commanded. His name can attract an audience, establish credibility, build a ministry, generate wealth, and confer an appearance of spiritual authority. Jesus becomes useful.

But the name of Jesus is not ours to use. We are His to use.

That was the difference between Paul and the sons of Sceva. Paul did not possess some magical formula unavailable to them. Paul belonged to Christ. He preached Christ, served Christ, suffered for Christ, and exercised only the authority Christ had given him.

Remarkably, the evil spirit knew the difference.

"Jesus I know, and Paul I recognize, but who are you?"

What a devastating question.

The spirit knew Jesus. It recognized Paul as one who belonged to Jesus. But these seven men possessed nothing more than a borrowed name.

Jesus warned that the same tragedy would appear again: *"On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?'"* Yet He will answer some of them, *"I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness."* Matthew 7:22–23, ESV

Knowing the name of Jesus is not the same as knowing Jesus. Speaking His name is not the same as belonging to Him. Performing religious works in His name is not proof that He authorized them.

The sons of Sceva entered that house attempting to make the name of Jesus serve them. They left exposed, humiliated, and wounded. Yet the story ends not with their humiliation but with Christ's exaltation: *"the name of the Lord Jesus was extolled."*

Men may misuse His name. False teachers may exploit His name. Religious pretenders may borrow His name.

But the name belongs to Him.

And ultimately, His name will be glorified.

Just a thought.

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