

Acts

Part 49 – “Trouble in the City of Artemis”

Acts 19:20-41

The second half of Acts 19 is the most extended record of a single event in Paul's ministry at Ephesus. Interestingly, not a single word from Paul is recorded. Luke recounts the riot that was stirred up in the city through a combustible mixture of idolatry and civic pride. The silversmiths of Ephesus were responsible for the unrest not the Christians. This is an important point because one of the charges leveled against Christians in the Roman Empire was that they threatened the peace. The riot in Ephesus served to illustrate that the opposite was true. As was the case in Jesus' day, the genuine threats to peace came not from the Lord's disciples but from those who played on public paranoia and religious zeal to oppose the Way.

This is not to say that Christians and the gospel they proclaim have no impact upon society. Indeed wherever the gospel is rightly proclaimed changes will follow. This is particularly true when, by God's grace, many disciples are made. In the case of Ephesus the significant number of converts to Christ yielded a direct economic impact which many experienced as negative. The worship of the false god Artemis was so much a part of the city's economy that the many conversions to Christ under Paul's ministry had a negative impact on the silver trade.



There is a sense in which the gospel is a threat. But not in the way Demetrius claimed. The gospel is a threat to sin. It is a threat to our idols. Once we embrace the gospel we cannot simply continue with life on our terms. We have submitted to a Lord who is jealous for his glory and our holiness. Meanwhile we live in a world that remains as committed as ever to its idols. And like our Lord we must never seek to advance the good news by violence or manipulation. Rather, we “repay evil with calm kindness and forthright witness, watching God win his victory in his way” (D. Johnson, 245).

Main Idea: Wherever the gospel is rightly proclaimed and sincerely believed there will be aggressive opposition.

Vs. 21 – Paul was on his way to Jerusalem to bring “the collection” that Luke has not mentioned, but knows about (24:17), and then wanted to head west, actually to Spain, but with hopes of stopping in Rome along the way. He says that this was his plan at this time in Romans 15:24-25.

Vs. 22 – Paul was sending Timothy to Corinth to find out how the church had received his hard letter (1 Cor. 4:17). News had reached him during his time in Ephesus of the problems in Corinth and he had addressed them in that letter and now wanted to know how his rebuke had been received. Paul would meet Timothy in Macedonia coming back with a good report from Corinth and write 2 Corinthians from there.

Vs. 23 – Here the opposition arises from pagan not Jewish sources.

Vs. 26 – Paul no doubt made that argument with all the force and with the same reasons as Isaiah had used.

Vs. 27 – The silversmiths were concerned fundamentally about their loss of revenue. For those whose income was not reduced by the turn away from idols the silversmiths appealed to the people's religious and patriotic fervor to stir up opposition against Paul and the other Christians.

Vs. 32 – This mob action was confused and potentially dangerous for Paul. The crowd could have been as much anti-Jewish as anti-Christian, for both condemned the worshipping of idols.

Vs. 33 – The Jews wanted to make clear that they had nothing to do with the Christians.

Vs. 41 – The city clerk (similar to a mayor) was not motivated by a desire to protect the Christians as he was in promoting law and order. The Romans were generally interested in getting rid of the democratic assemblies that remained in some of the old Greek towns and getting a reputation for disorder would hand them the excuse they needed.

What we learn from the Ephesian riot about advancing the gospel...

1. The reception of the gospel always results in transformation.

Vv. (18-20) 23-34

- Paul's ministry in Ephesus was remarkably fruitful. The number of those within Ephesus and the surrounding regions who were converting to Christ was so significant that it had a direct impact upon that portion of the local economy which depended upon idol worship. Ephesus drew tourists from all over the Empire. The religious trinkets provided by the local silversmiths was profitable precisely because of the social and economic structures supported by the Artemis cult.
- The transformation of those individuals hearing and believing the gospel was evidenced in their ridding their lives of their former idolatry (Vv. 18-20). The transformation of the city was good but disruptive. That is, while the noticeable decline in idol worship was surely a good thing, the unconverted did not see it that way. Violent opposition was the result of this individual and societal transformation. The gospel is not polite. The gospel is good news. It is the lifesaving message of God's grace. But it is intrusive and calls for fundamental transformation. It disrupts and divides even as it brings liberty.

2. Unbelief is often dishonest about its true objectives.

Vs. 27

- Demetrius the silversmith responsible for stirring up the Ephesian mob appealed to the people's religious and patriotic fervor. In fact, the primary reason for Demetrius' anger toward Paul and the others was not theological but economic. When considering the objections of unbelievers Christians must discern the difference between surface-level objections from the deeper reasons for unbelief.

3. Christians must model their Lord's peaceful response to opposition.

Vv. 35-41

- At no time do the disciples of Jesus use violence, manipulation or coercion to respond to opposition. Christians must never advance their cause through violence or threats of civil unrest. It is interesting to note that God used, in this instance, a pagan civil authority to protect the disciples of Jesus. It is a reminder that we ought to regularly pray for the civil authorities and elected officials that they might contribute to the peace and order of society.