

The Riot

Acts 19:23-41

Ephesus:

Treasure House of Asia Minor

In our discussions of Acts, chapter 19, we have seen the apostle Paul serve in Ephesus for about two years. The results have been electrifying. We closed our last discussion with some of the results.

Verse 19 records the public burning of magic books and formulas by the church. The worth of this occult, superstitious material would have been in today's economy, between eight and ten million dollars.

The Christians were throwing off their ties to their pagan surroundings and their pagan religious past. They were now becoming a threat to the Ephesian industry, which was an industry that centered around one of the seven wonders of the world – the Temple of Artemis.

We noted in the last sermon, the apostolic signs and wonders through Paul, which included healing and exorcism.

I mentioned in our last discussion also, the rise of a fascination with the demonic world and the misapplication of the experiences of the apostolic community to the believer today.

I pointed out as well, the growth of the "Spiritual Warfare Industry," replete with conferences, seminars, and books on the believer's ability to do what the apostles did, which includes raising the dead, healing, and exorcism.

These ministries sound grand, exciting and authoritative. Today, spiritual warriors are claiming the victory of God over some city or individual. They are binding demons and ridding people of all sorts of curses and spells. They are claiming

authority over Satan and covering geographical territories by means of special demon-crushing prayers.

At the same time, the church is growing weaker and more doctrinally illiterate than ever. It also has increasingly become a confusing spectacle of excesses, immorality, greed, and worldliness.

Definitive Statements on Spiritual Warfare

The most definitive statements in the inspired letters that instruct the church follow the book of Acts and are known as epistles.

Ephesians 6

One of these definitive statements on true spiritual warfare is in Ephesians, chapter 6, which gives us a listing of our armor, in verses 14 and 15:

- truth,
- righteousness,
- the gospel,
- faith.

In other words, we are to, as Paul said in Titus, chapter 2, verse 10b,

... adorn [wear as clothing] the doctrine of God our Savior ...

II Corinthians 10

Another passage that makes a definitive statement on spiritual warfare is II Corinthians, chapter 10, verses 3 through 5a, which says,

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons

of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses. We are destroying . . .

(. . . territorial spirits? . . . demons to the abyss? . . . claiming authority over Satan and his minions? . . . binding the enemy? . . . no, we are destroying . . .),

. . . speculations and every lofty thing [idea] raised up against the knowledge of God . . .

Ladies and gentlemen, our battle is a battle between truth and error; between the doctrine of God and the doctrines of demons. (I Timothy 4:1)

I know that does not sound as exciting, but it is the truth. We are in a battle between the theology of Satan and the theology of God.

Remember, the very first battle took place in the Garden of Eden. It was a battle that humanity lost. The battle began, and continues today, with the very first words of Satan through the serpent, as recorded in Genesis, chapter 3, verse 1b,

. . . has God [really] said . . .?

That means this battle has as much to do with your mind as it does your heart. It is a battle between the words of God and the words of Satan.

That is why Paul said, in II Timothy, chapter 2, verse 15, to,

Be diligent [study] to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth.

Now, the word in II Corinthians, chapter 10, verse 4, translated “fortress,” conjures up the idea of knights in shining armor; prancing stallions; swords and spears, right? It sounds romantic, right? I hate to pop your Harlequin bubble, but the word can also be translated “prison”. Reinecker’s linguistic key to the Greek New Testament records that one of the earliest uses of this word “ochuroma,” in the Greek, referred to a prison house. So we are in the process of destroying prisons.

I believe that is Paul’s idea in this verse because of the way he ends the thought. Notice verse 5 again,

We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ,

In other words, Satan has humanity held captive. They are imprisoned by his false doctrine. We, however, use the weapon of true doctrine (or what Paul calls in these verses the “divinely powerful” weapon, and Ephesians, chapter 6, calls the sword of

the Spirit), which is the word of God, to liberate these captives, so they become captivated instead to Christ.

Jesus Christ said, as recorded in John, chapter 8, verse 32,

. . . you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.

It does not sound as exciting, but our battle has been, and still is, a battle between two theologies; two systems of faith. One listens to the voice of the deceiver and the other to the voice of the Redeemer.

I personally think that doctrine is a lot more exciting than all the other superstitious dribble that is rolling off evangelical presses lately – even if they are best sellers.

What we need is a return to the study of the doctrines of Christ; the words of Christ which Paul declares are divinely powerful against the enslaving schemes of the devil.

What we need to be selling out of are not books on demon warfare – how to bind demons and how to pray with authority against demons, with all kinds of misinterpreted and misapplied biblical texts, but books on basic Bible doctrine and the character and attributes of God. In other words, books that are primarily a study of the Bible.

I happen to believe that Satan loves the fact that Christians are so distracted by his kingdom; so caught up with his power; so mesmerized by his fallen angels and, by the way, equally mesmerized by the good angels, that they ignore a thorough study of God’s kingdom and an attraction to His supreme power and His holiness and His grace.

Well, that is my introduction for today!

Now in Acts, chapter 19, we read in verse 23,

About that time there occurred no small disturbance concerning the Way.

Skip to verse 40 where we read that the town clerk ends the riot by saying,

For indeed we are in danger of being accused of a riot in connection with today’s events, since there is no real cause for it, and in this connection we will be unable to account for this disorderly gathering.

I wanted to read the ending as well as the beginning of this narrative, so that you might know right away that the Christians have not purposefully created a civil disturbance. They have simply acted and spoken like Christians, and the unbelievers have created a disturbance because of it.

Artemis: Queen of Heaven and Goddess of Earth

Now notice verses 24 through 28.

For a certain man named Demetrius, a silversmith, who made silver shrines of Artemis, was bringing no little business to the craftsmen;

these he gathered together with the workmen of similar trades, and said, "Men, you know that our prosperity depends upon this business.

"You see and hear that not only in Ephesus, but in almost all of Asia, this Paul has persuaded and turned away a considerable number of people, saying that gods made with hands are no gods at all.

"Not only is there danger that this trade of ours fall into disrepute, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis be regarded as worthless and that she whom all of Asia and the world worship will even be dethroned from her magnificence."

When they heard this and were filled with rage, they began crying out, saying, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!"

Artemis was the Queen of Heaven; she was believed to be the Goddess of Earth and nature. And Ephesus was the guardian city of this immensely popular religion.

The temple to her glory was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. It was five times longer and wider than the auditorium of our church, with a ceiling three times higher. One hundred, twenty-seven pillars supported the exterior walls. They were inlaid with precious jewels and covered with gold. Inside the temple was a huge altar, and resting on the altar was a twenty foot high image of Artemis, an image that supposedly fell from the heavens.

The cult of Artemis extended throughout the Roman Empire with more than thirty shrines to the mother goddess. Ephesus was the capital city of this religion. Every year, during a week in the spring, followers of Artemis made a pilgrimage to Ephesus for a week of immorality and debauchery in her name. They would give gifts to her and purchase little silver replicas of the temple to take home with them, supposedly blessed by her power.

Gnosticism and Feminism

The worship of the mother goddess was not something new and is not something that has ceased. As hard as it may be to believe, a revival of goddess worship is growing stronger everywhere in our country.

You read in the newspapers about the Episcopalians, the Methodists, and the liberal Baptists wanting to gender neutralize the Bible; take out the masculine forms of God and alternate between "He" and "She". This thought traces its roots to ancient days.

What the average American does not realize is the fact that the movement called Feminism in America is at its heart, a religious movement. Most Americans think it is nothing more than women wanting to get out of the kitchen and into the corporate scene with equal pay. That does not even scratch the surface of its underlying motivation.

Let me give some quotes.

Annie Laurie Gaylor wrote an article for the *Humanist* a number of years ago, called "Feminist Salvation". She wrote,

Let's forget about the mythical Jesus and look for encouragement, solace, and inspiration from real women. Two thousand years of patriarchal rule under the shadow of the cross ought to be enough to turn women toward the feminist's salvation of the world.

The Declaration of Feminism that was crafted in November of 1971, stated their agenda, and among these statements was this one: "We must return to ancient female religions."

Peter Jones, a man who may or may not be a believer, summarized Vice President Al Gore's book called *Earth in the Balance, Ecology and the Human Spirit*, by saying,

Gore's involvement in ecology is an expression of his belief in the connectedness of all things, in the great value of all religious faiths and in his hope that ancient pagan goddess worship will help bring us planetary and personal salvation.

This ancient goddess worship that they want to return to has a name – it is a broad categorical term called Gnosticism.

Gnosticism turned the creation account upside down and taught that Dame Wisdom was the true and living God. In other words there was a mystical,

heavenly woman named Sophia (which is the Greek word for “wisdom”).

The Gnostics taught that Sophia entered the snake in the Garden and taught both Adam and Eve the true way of salvation. The snake in Gnostic literature, is not called “the tempter,” but “the instructor”. The serpent was, in Gnostic literature, the redeemer; because the serpent was the incarnated woman who came and taught the truth of true salvation through the female goddess Sophia.

All you have to do is read current religious news to see the resurgence of Sophia worship. It is part and parcel of the gender-neutralizing movement that is at the core of feminism.

A Roman Catholic theologian Carol Crist wrote, “I found God in myself and I loved her fiercely.”

That says it all, doesn’t it? God is within you and God is feminine.

I recently read a Gnostic text that was recorded by John MacArthur in a transcript. Let me quote what Dame Wisdom says,

I am androgynous. I am both mother and father since I copulate with myself. I copulate with myself and with those who love me and it is through me alone that all stands firm. I am the womb that gives shape to all by giving birth to the light that shines in splendor. I am the eon to come, I am the fulfillment of the all, that is the glory of the mother.

It should be no surprise to you that Gnosticism exalted lesbianism. Anything that reversed the sexual roles of men and women was good.

Well, if you want to see what it is like to be inundated into a false system of worship – worship surrounding the cult of a goddess – Ephesus provides that example. This form of religion was so perverse and so degrading that it affected the entire city.

Understand also, that the Temple of Artemis superseded Roman law. The temple was so powerful that, if any criminal in the Roman Empire could make it to the temple, he would be granted immediate asylum.

Ephesus was not only crawling with exorcists, sorcerers, and religious prostitutes, but with felons who had escaped the law by becoming worshippers of the female goddess Artemis, as well.

Demetrius: Protector of Religion and Profit Margins

Look back again as Demetrius speaks in verse 27 of Acts, chapter 19,

Not only is there danger that this trade of ours fall into disrepute, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis be regarded as worthless and that she whom all of Asia and the world worship will even be dethroned from her magnificence.

Demetrius is the spokesman in this verse. He is the protector of false religion and also of the religion’s profit margin. An inscription discovered in Ephesus that dates from around this time (AD 57), describes a certain Demetrius as the “warden of the temple”. If this was the same Demetrius, this would indicate that he was not only the head of the silversmith union, but a leader in the Temple of Artemis. And the temple’s profit margin was in jeopardy. By the way, this temple was so wealthy from receiving financial gifts from around the empire that it also served as one of Europe’s most powerful banks, collecting deposits and making loans.

Demetrius’ comments could be summed up, “Either Christianity is stopped or we’ll go bankrupt.”

For two years, Paul has been teaching. Where was Demetrius then? Paul was not a threat, even though he was teaching the worship of a male God and a male Redeemer, the God-man. Big deal! But now, it is different.

Christianity is acceptable as long as it does not . . .

Christianity is acceptable as long as it does not:

- change anything,
- upset anything,
- require anything,
- condemn anything.

Let us just apply this to one small arena in America. What would happen to the media and its economy if Christians stopped going to movies or watching television shows that included profanity, nudity, sensuality, adultery, brutality, or any dishonorable activity other than what Paul told us to spend our time thinking about? Remember, Philippians, chapter 4, verse 8,

. . . whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things.

What would happen if Christians applied purity to this one small arena of American economy?

Well, that is too convicting, so let us move on. I will move on, but you still need to make up your mind!

There is about to be a riot in Ephesus? Why? Because Christians were affecting the primary industry of Ephesus. How? By acting as if it no longer existed.

Let me read something fascinating. About seventy years after this event took place in Ephesus, a Roman governor named Pliny wrote to the Emperor Trajan to ask how to handle the Christians. He wrote that the Christians were not immoral or subversive. The problem, he wrote, is that, "They have had a bad effect upon the people, they have stopped going to the shrines."

When people stopped going to the temple, a large block of the population was unable to support themselves. So he asks Trajan in a letter, if he should drive the Christians away so that the people would come back to the temple, start giving money, and take this problem off his hands. Trajan responded not to do anything to the Christians until they violated the law.

Now notice as the mob escalates, in verses 29 through 32.

The city was filled with the confusion, and they rushed with one accord into the theater, dragging along Gaius and Aristarchus, Paul's traveling companions from Macedonia.

And when Paul wanted to go into the assembly, the disciples would not let him.

Also some of the Asiarchs who were friends of his sent to him and repeatedly urged him not to venture into the theater.

So then, some were shouting one thing and some another, for the assembly was in confusion, and the majority did not know for what reason they had come together.

What a classic illustration of any society. People tend to do and think what the majority of people do and think. They do not even know why they have rushed into this outdoor, 25,000 seat arena, but everybody else has.

What an incredible picture of Matthew, chapter 7, verse 13b,

... the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it.

Alexander: Defender of the Religious Status Quo

Look at verse 33.

Some of the crowd concluded it was Alexander, since the Jews had put him forward; and having motioned with his hand, Alexander was intending to make a defense to the assembly.

Now the first part of this verse could be translated differently, which gives us the perspective of Alexander's crowd rather than the Ephesians. You could render the first phrase, in the Greek, "sumbibazo," meaning that some of the Jews instructed Alexander, having put him forward. So, in other words, the Jews who lived in Ephesus were concerned that they could be associated with Paul, the Jewish teacher, and then, any trouble that came to Paul's following would come automatically to them. So Alexander, evidently a leading Jew, steps forward to make a defense of the Jewish population of Ephesus as having nothing to do with Paul.

It is interesting that Paul refers to a man named Alexander, in a later epistle to Timothy, as a man who did him much harm. It could be the same man.

The tragedy however, is that Alexander is basically revealing that the Jews who lived in Ephesus had compromised in the true spirit of ecumenicism. In other words, "You do your thing, we'll do our thing, and we'll both try to give value to one another's system of faith."

In reality, the Jews were following a jealous God who would give His glory to no other god. They just did not want to upset anyone by saying it.

It is interesting that Alexander is not given a chance to say anything. Continue to verse 34.

But when they recognized that he was a Jew, a single outcry arose from them all as they shouted for about two hours, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!"

In other words, they knew that Alexander represented a male God. They knew that, even though there had been a co-existence of Judaism and Artemis worship, there could be no agreement.

Imagine, for two hours, twenty-five thousand Ephesians worshiped their goddess, and chanted praise to her with delirious passion.

Town Clerk:

Unsuspecting Biographer of Christianity

Look at verses 35 through 41.

After quieting the crowd, the town clerk said, “Men of Ephesus, what man is there after all who does not know that the city of the Ephesians is guardian of the temple of the great Artemis and of the image which fell down from heaven?”

“So, since these are undeniable facts, you ought to keep calm and to do nothing rash.

“For you have brought these men here who are neither robbers of temples nor blasphemers of our goddess.

“So then, if Demetrius and the craftsmen who are with him have a complaint against any man, the courts are in session and proconsuls are available; let them bring charges against one another.

“But if you want anything beyond this, it shall be settled in the lawful assembly.

“For indeed we are in danger of being accused of a riot in connection with today’s events, since there is no real cause for it, and in this connection we will be unable to account for this disorderly gathering.”

After saying this he dismissed the assembly.

The Town Clerk becomes for us, an unsuspecting biographer of Christianity. He inadvertently tells a lot about how Christianity acted in Ephesus, and thereby made this incredible impact.

How Christianity made an impact

Did you notice what the town clerk said they did not do? According to verse 37:

- they did not blaspheme the false gods;
- they did not steal from the temple.

In other words, they did not break the law.

There is every reason to believe that the citizens of Ephesus, including the Christians, were required to pay some sort of tax to provide for some of the overhead of the temple. It was, after all, the city bank. The Christians’ record was clean.

The Christians had created huge waves. How? Warren Wiersbe writes,

Paul did not arouse the opposition of the silversmiths by picketing the temple or staging anti-idolatry rallies. All he did was teach the truth daily and send out his converts to witness to the lost people in the city. As more and more people got converted, fewer and fewer customers were available.ⁱ

John MacArthur adds,

The Ephesian believers did not lobby the city authorities, picket the silversmith’s shops or organize demonstrations against Artemis worship. Nor did they try to be popular – they preached and lived out the message and let the power of their changed lives confront and push out the old ways.ⁱⁱ

One more author, James Montgomery Boice, added these words,

How did Christianity triumph? How did Christians win the day? It was not by appealing to numbers. It was not by a play on the emotions. The Christians did not circulate a petition to see if they could get 51% of the Ephesians to sign it saying, “Artemis is no goddess, and the God of the Old Testament is the true God.” The Christians did not have a mass rally. They did not send Christians into the amphitheater to do their thing. They did exactly what Jesus Christ had done and what He sent them into the world to do. They preached the gospel so that men and women got converted, and once they were converted they taught them how to live for Jesus Christ.ⁱⁱⁱ

From this passage, we can discover what the Christians did:

- they lived pure lives (verse 18);
- they refused to support ungodliness (verse 19);
- they personally sacrificed for the sake of the gospel – burning their pagan materials in a bonfire (verse 19) – (We discussed this in our last discussion. Did anyone think of the fact that they could have resold their stuff? It was worth millions. Talk about a garage sale!);
- they, most importantly, delivered the word of the Lord, and it grew mightily and prevailed (verse 20).

In other words, they changed their world.

Can we change our world this way? Yes, we can. In fact, as I have mentioned before, this is the only way we can truly change our culture.

We are living in a generation where we have everything due to the revival of goddess worship. Ecumenicism is attempting to find value in every religious system, rather than offend anyone. The goal of feminism to reverse sexual norms seems to have succeeded – sodomites and lesbians are now openly exposed, accepted, endorsed, and ordained by political and religious leaders. The destruction of the nuclear family continues at an alarming rate. Is there hope?

The church needs to take its cue from Ephesus. Ask the Ephesian believers, who faced much more than we are facing. They changed their world by allowing God through Christ, to change them. And they swung the sword of the Spirit with the power of prayer.

If you are a student of church history, you have heard of the great Welsh revival. It was a revival that brought to faith in Christ some 100,000 people in a five month period.

The social impact of the Welsh revival was astounding. Judges were present with white gloves, as they had no cases to try – no robberies, murders, burglaries, rapes, embezzlements – nothing. The District Consul held an emergency meeting to discuss what to do with the police, now that they were inactive.

The Welsh revival swept into America in a limited fashion. Listen to the words of an article in the *Denver Post*, dated January 20, 1905,

For two hours at midday all Denver was held in a spell . . . the marts of trade were deserted between noon and two o'clock this afternoon, and all worldly affairs were forgotten. Going to and coming from the great prayer meetings, thousands of men and women radiated this Spirit which filled them. Seldom has such a remarkable sight been witnessed – an entire great city, in the middle of a busy weekday, bowing before the throne of heaven and asking the blessing of the King of the Universe.

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ⁱ Warren Wiersbe, *Be Daring*, p. 77.

ⁱⁱ John MacArthur, *Acts*, p. 184.

ⁱⁱⁱ James Montgomery Boice, *Acts*, p. 334.