

RAGE AGAINST THE MISSIONARY

ACTS 19:21-20:1 OCTOBER 21, 2020

After years of uninterrupted ministry, we find ourselves in a time where Christianity is becoming more suspect to the world around us. There are some who suggest that church gatherings are “super-spreaders” of COVID-19.¹ We see officials trying to make the case that Amy Coney Barrett’s faith is going to lead to the ruin of the American society if she is confirmed to the Supreme Court.²

At the same time we see a general backdrop of societal unrest. It’s truly an unusual time. While I’m not suggesting that we are facing the kind of persecution that Paul faced in Ephesus, I will say that the idea of a sudden riot breaking out in our town and Christians being called on the carpet is not as far-fetched as it used to be.

We’re seeing lots of demonstrations in lots of places over lots of issues. Some are peaceful, some are not. Some are rallies, some are riots. Often, the point of these gatherings is to angrily complain about *who* is to blame for one problem or another. No doubt many of you have been invited to a gathering of that sort. And, these sorts of *peaceful* protests have their place in a free society. But what is our part to play? Or, what might we expect and how might we respond in a time like this?

God’s word gives us guidance and an example here in Acts 19. And even if this passage isn’t meant to be *direct* preparation for us, we can still be built up by being reminded of what Christianity is. We can be built up and fortified against the kinds of attacks the enemy might use in our city or our nation. And we can be reminded of just how helpful and essential the Church really is.

We begin in verse 21 of chapter 19.

Acts 19:21 - ²¹After these events, Paul resolved by the Spirit to pass through Macedonia and Achaia and go to Jerusalem. “After I’ve been there,” he said, “It is necessary for me to see Rome as well.”

We saw last time that a wonderful revival was taking place in the city of Ephesus. Lots of people were getting saved and having their lives transformed. We’re about 25 years past Pentecost at this point.³ And Paul has spent the last 2 or 3 years in the city of Ephesus being used by God. But now, he’s decided to move on. Rather, I should say that he *and the Lord* decided it. Certainly it was his desire to go back to some of the places he had been before, but it wasn’t just *his* plan. The Holy Spirit compelled him to go. In the next chapter he’ll say he was *bound* to do it.

It shows us that Paul consistently had plans for *future* ministry, while not neglecting present opportunities. Paul was great about being in the moment and seeing what was right in front of him, the needs, the open doors, the chances to preach and the minister. But he also kept making future plans for more service to the Lord. If we follow his thinking during this time in his life, piecing together what’s written here and what he wrote elsewhere, his plan was to go to Greece then Jerusalem, on to Rome and even as far as Spain. He had a *passion* for ministry and the preaching of the Gospel. And, while we might say he was *motivated* by those personal desires, we also see he

¹ <https://prospect.org/coronavirus/when-churches-are-superspreaders/>

² <https://twitter.com/KatieHill4CA/status/1308561448197529601>

<https://grabien.com/getmedia.php?id=1052747&key=b3ced9bd3d7eca86fccc721c1ecc585e2>

³ Bible Knowledge Commentary

disciplined himself to be *directed* by God the Holy Spirit. This mentality kept him from becoming the kind of person that never did anything until that one *big* opportunity came along, but also kept him from just doing his own thing and calling it missions.

Now, if you were to look at a map, you'd see that if he wanted to end up in Jerusalem, going to Macedonia was the wrong way. Why take the long way 'round? Well, trouble was brewing in the church at Corinth and he felt a duty to get involved. And he also wanted to gather an offering from the Gentile churches to be brought to the believers in need in Jerusalem.

So, it wasn't just that Paul wanted to do something new and exciting. This can happen to Christians sometimes. There's an excitement to do something fun and new. And often God *does* call us to do new things. But it's always easier to pick the job of planting a tree than pulling a bunch of weeds. And, in the wide scope of ministry, sometimes we're going to be asked to do the weed pulling.

Acts 19:22 - 22 After sending to Macedonia two of those who assisted him, Timothy and Erastus, he himself stayed in Asia for a while.

We see a selflessness in this act. These guys helped Paul, but for the sake of the family in Corinth, he sent them out. Timothy had a pastor's heart and Corinth needed a compassionate pastor. Erastus, we learn in Romans 16 had been the city treasurer there. So he was a great candidate to send to prepare the gathering of funds for relief in Judea.⁴

While your resume doesn't determine or limit what kind of thing you can do for God, you *can* use your abilities and position for the furtherance of the Gospel. Dorcas could sew. She used that for Christ. Joseph of Arimathea had money and influence. He used them for Christ. If you have a mind for administration, offer it to the Lord. If you're in a position of leadership in a company or a municipality, use it to glorify the name of Christ.

Acts 19:23 - 23 About that time there was a major disturbance about the Way.

Why now? Why not shake things up in the last 2 years? Of course, we know the devil can't simply do whatever he wants, God was extending protection to Paul throughout his ministry in Ephesus. But now, just as the apostle was about to pack up, there was an onslaught.

It reminded me of a moment in the classic movie *Star Trek II: The Wrath Of Khan*. Khan, the villain, is chasing the heroes and they're about to escape into a nebula. One of Khan's lieutenants says, "If they go in there, we'll lose them." So Khan says, "Explain it to them." And they open fire on the *Enterprise* and the battle ensues. Paul is launching out again. I'm sure, in his strategizing, the devil would rather have had him stuck in one place than on the move.

Now here Christianity is referred to as "the Way." We don't use that phrase much anymore, but maybe we should. It reminds us that we are *headed* somewhere. We are leaving this world behind and we're supposed to bring people along with us. We're reminded that this *Way* is a different way than the unbelieving world is taking. Different destination. Different pace. Different scenery and purpose. We're reminded that it is the *Way*, not the *Stance*. By definition it's an image of progress and development and growth. It requires participation and endurance and trust as we walk along after the leading of the Lord, often without much visibility.

⁴ Barnes' Notes On The Bible

Why were the unbelieving Ephesians so disturbed? We'll get some specifics in a moment, but we know, generally, it was because these people became so *different*. Those who had been pagan weren't pagan anymore. Those who had shared a mindset of materialism didn't feel the same way. This caused a great agitation among the unbelievers. That's a great contrast to what is meant to be true of us as Christians. The Gospel made them *agitated*, it's to make us *agents* of peace and joy.

Acts 19:24 - ²⁴For a person named Demetrius, a silversmith who made silver shrines of Artemis, provided a great deal of business for the craftsmen.

This guy was a leader among those who made pornographic, pagan mementos for worshipers and tourists who went to the temple of Diana. We also learn that he was doing just fine. *A great deal* of business. But his business was a detriment to the lives and souls of people and, ultimately, the world around him. He helped furnish their spiritual prisons.

Some professions are wrong. There are industries that God-fearing people have no business being a part of. I don't need to list them because the Holy Spirit will disqualify them in your heart as you walk with Him. But what we do in the 9-to-5 matters. And if it brings destruction and enslavement to people, we should count it as loss and walk away, just as so many Ephesians had done.

Acts 19:25 - ²⁵When he had assembled them, as well as the workers engaged in this type of business, he said, "Men, you know that our prosperity is derived from this business.

So here we have the primary reason for the disturbance: Christianity was a threat to their prosperity.

Is God for prosperity? There is a whole swath of teaching called the "prosperity Gospel" that suggests that God *wants* you to be healthy and wealthy and have material blessing. Reading the Bible, I think a fairer question to ask is whether God is *against* prosperity. The answer has to be "Sometimes, but not always." God *is* against ill-gotten wealth. He's opposed to people becoming rich through taking advantage of others. And He often warns us about the spiritual dangers of material prosperity.

But, it's also clear that being well off is not, as a rule, a bad thing. Many of the Old Testament heroes were incredibly wealthy. Even here in the book of Acts we see faithful, Spirit-filled believers who had a lot compared to others. Lydia is one. She used her wealth to bless people. Cornelius had a household and, we're told, gave a lot of money to the poor.

It's the *heart* that God is interested in, not the wallet. But we should be careful, because the wallet tends to exert influence over the heart. So be on watch for that danger.

Acts 19:26-27 - ²⁶You see and hear that not only in Ephesus, but in almost all of Asia, this man Paul has persuaded and misled a considerable number of people by saying that gods made by hand are not gods. ²⁷Not only do we run a risk that our business may be discredited, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis may be despised and her magnificence come to the verge of ruin—the very one all of Asia and the world worship."

They considered Christianity to not only be a threat to their prosperity, but also to their philosophy and their prominence. They said, "Paul is teaching that hand made gods are not gods!" What a sad philosophy to believe in. "This little silver idol will protect me and give my life meaning and bring me

vibrance and fertility!” We’re removed from that overtly pagan way of thinking. But the human heart *must* rely on something. Today we might substitute a paycheck or career in the place of the silver shrine. My ‘identity’ or affiliation becomes that thing that we think will keep our lives steered on course. God comes along and dismantles those lies, revealing how lost and rudderless we are without Him, but then gives us *truth* to build a real life on. A good life that matters.

As Christians, we want to be delivering *truth*. We can argue against the philosophies of this world, and should, with the end goal being that we give people the truth of life.

The Ephesians were bothered that Christianity might destroy the prominence of their proudly pagan city. They can’t even hear the absurdity of their beliefs. Hearing them talk, you’d think the Artemis was some sort of ancient Tinkerbell, who can only survive if enough people clap for her. Puny god!

This pulls back a curtain for us, though. Don’t expect people out in the world to hold rational beliefs. This is important in a volatile time like we find ourselves in. People believe crazy things. They make sense to them because they’re trapped in their sin. There’s no use beating them upside the head. It’s the heart that we need to focus on. The truth will set them free. So we want to base our ministries and our behaviors on the unchaining truth of Scripture.

What’s a real world application of that idea? Well, let me just say this: In this passage, there’s no Christian petition to close the Temple of Artemis. I’m guessing there was a lot of *prayer* for that to happen, but the Christians believed that if a person’s *life* was transformed, they wouldn’t keep being pagan. And that’s true. So, listen, I’ve signed petitions. We’re not against them. But the ultimate answer for what’s wrong in our society is that people need to be set free from sin and given new life in Christ. We can prove it from the Bible and we can prove it from history. You look at historic revivals, like the revival in Wales in 1904, and you see how *places* are transformed once *people* are transformed. During that 1 year revival, maybe 150,000 people were saved out of the population of 2.4 million. But even that relatively small percentage was enough that “The crime rate dropped, often to nothing. The police force reported that they had little more to do than supervise the coming and going of the people to the chapel prayer meetings, while magistrates turned up at courts to discover no cases to try. The mines underground echoed with the sounds of prayer and hymns, instead of nasty jokes. And, [they say] not only did the miners put in a better day's work, but also that the pit ponies were so used to being cursed and sworn at, that they couldn't understand orders being given in kind, clean words! Yet, still the work output increased.”⁵

That’s the kind of salty effect we’re meant to have in Hanford and the wider world.

Acts 19:28-29 - ²⁸When they had heard this, they were filled with rage and began to cry out, “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” ²⁹So the city was filled with confusion, and they rushed all together into the amphitheater, dragging along Gaius and Aristarchus, Macedonians who were Paul’s traveling companions.

This mob was marked by rage. We’re to be a group marked by *joy*. It’s easy to be angry. It’s God’s intent that we be full of grace. Think of people God used in great revivals. Evan Roberts was one of those used in a major way in Wales. “Someone remarked that the most striking feature of the revival ‘is the joyousness and radiant happiness of the evangelist...The very essence of his campaign is

⁵ <http://truthinhistory.org/the-welsh-revival-of-1904-1905-2.html>

mirth.”⁶ Think of Chuck Smith, used by God during the Jesus Movement of the 1960s. A man of grace and joy.

Now think of the movements shaking our nation today. They’re marked by rage and anger and destruction and violence. That’s not from God.

This angry mob went and found two of Paul’s friends and dragged them out into the riot. I’m guessing it was a surprise to them, but, then again, this *is* what you sign up for when you become a believer. You’re not only joining the ranks of heaven, you’re enlisting in a war where you’re promised trouble, hatred and attack from the enemies of God. We know that Aristarchus would later become a prisoner for Christ along with Paul. We’ve signed up for the same thing.

Acts 19:30-31 - ³⁰Although Paul wanted to go in before the people, the disciples did not let him. ³¹Even some of the provincial officials of Asia, who were his friends, sent word to him, pleading with him not to venture into the amphitheater.

Paul is often pictured alone in a cell or adrift in the sea, so it’s a nice reminder that he had friends who really loved him. And they knew he wouldn’t hold back, but would go put himself in danger for the sake of his friends and the Gospel. Yet, in *this* situation, that wouldn’t have been wise. Matthew Henry wrote: “We may be called upon to lay down our lives, but not to *throw away* our lives.” In *this* situation, Paul needed wise people to counsel him to *not* go in. And we see he took it as from the Lord. Later, when all his friends beg him to not go into Jerusalem he says, “Hey, I’m going.” But here, it seems, the counsel was from the Lord for his protection.

Don’t be a yes-man to your Christian friends. Sometimes our friends have ideas or are making plans that are going to shipwreck their lives. Be brave enough to try to restrain them or at least plead with them not to set sail into ruin.

Acts 19:32-34 - ³²Some were shouting one thing and some another, because the assembly was in confusion, and most of them did not know why they had come together. ³³Some Jews in the crowd gave instructions to Alexander after they pushed him to the front. Motioning with his hand, Alexander wanted to make his defense to the people. ³⁴But when they recognized that he was a Jew, they all shouted in unison for about two hours, “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!”

Things are boiling over now. For some reason the Jewish community decided to try to get out in front of the story. Probably because no matter who is being persecuted, if it’s *not* the Jewish people, they’re usually second on the list. So, Alexander goes out there to try to separate the Jewish community from the Christians, but we’re way past discussion or debate by this point. It’s just fury and frenzy. And in his failure we see that it was not a good scene for Paul to insert himself in.

Acts 19:35-41 - ³⁵When the city clerk had calmed the crowd down, he said, “People of Ephesus! What person is there who doesn’t know that the city of the Ephesians is the temple guardian of the great Artemis, and of the image that fell from heaven? ³⁶Therefore, since these things are undeniable, you must keep calm and not do anything rash. ³⁷For you have brought these men here who are not temple robbers or blasphemers of our goddess. ³⁸So if Demetrius and the craftsmen who are with him have a case against anyone, the courts are in session,

⁶ <https://www.samstorms.org/enjoying-god-blog/post/10-things-you-should-know-about-the-welsh-revival-of-1904-06>

and there are proconsuls. Let them bring charges against one another. ³⁹ But if you seek anything further, it must be decided in a legal assembly. ⁴⁰ In fact, we run a risk of being charged with rioting for what happened today, since there is no justification that we can give as a reason for this disturbance.” ⁴¹ After saying this, he dismissed the assembly.

This guy is probably the top dog, when it comes to city officials.⁷ He’s doing the best he can, but you can tell his focus is all on their liberty. He didn’t want Ephesus to lose its status as a free city in the Roman Empire. Worse, a riot like this could lead to military intervention and capital punishment for rioters. The city clerk wants to keep his power and keep his liberty and his autonomy. He didn’t care that innocent men might die. He didn’t care about any of that. He cared about keeping the status quo. “Let’s all calm down and get back to living how we were so that no one will bother us and we can just do our own thing.”

As Christians we don’t want to just maintain the status quo in our communities. Righteousness exalts a nation. We’re to pursue justice, living quiet and peaceful lives marked by Godliness and dignity.

Luckily, this riot defused without more violence. Everyone went home, but it would’ve been a scary reality for the Christians in the city, and at *just* that moment, Paul announced he was leaving.

Acts 20:1 - After the uproar was over, Paul sent for the disciples, encouraged them, and after saying farewell, departed to go to Macedonia.

They would have to live in this time of instability, but they didn’t need to be shaken. Paul encouraged them that there was no need to fear the mob. They may come. Suffering may increase, but God was still surrounding them with His love and faithfulness. And the Christian imperative to walk with God in a way that changes lives continued, despite the unrest and suspicion. Because, even though Christianity may be a threat to paganism, ill-gotten prosperity or human pride, it is a force for peace and good in every city, in every climate. The nations may rage, but the Lord God is with us and will empower us to be His Body, working His good work wherever we find ourselves until we move on to our final destination.

⁷ A.T. Robertson <https://www.preceptaustin.org/acts-19-commentary#19:35>