

Acts 19:21-41: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Acts chapter 19 verses 21 to 41. Now after these events Paul resolved in the spirit to pass through Macedonia at Nicaea and go to Jerusalem saying, After I have been there I must also see Rome.

And having sent into Macedonia two of his helpers, Timothy and Erastus, he himself stayed in Asia for a while. About that time there arose no little disturbance concerning the way, for a man named Demetrius, a silversmith, who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought no little business to the craftsmen. These he gathered together with the workmen in similar trades and said, Men, you know that from this business we have our wealth, and you see and hear that not only in Ephesus, but in almost all of Asia this Paul has persuaded and turned away a great many people, saying that gods made with hands are not gods. And there is danger not only that this trade of ours may come into disrepute, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis may be counted as nothing, and that she may even be deposed from her magnificence, she whom all Asia and the world worship. When they heard this they were enraged and were crying out, Great is Artemis of the Ephesians! So the city was filled with a confusion, and they rushed together into the theatre, dragging with them Gaius and Aristarchus,

Macedonians who were Paul's companions in travel. But when Paul wished to go among the crowd, the disciples would not let him, and even some of the Asiarchs who were friends of his, sent to him and were urging him not to venture into the theatre. Now some cried out one thing, some another, for the assembly was in confusion, and most of them did not know why they had come together.

Some of the crowd prompted Alexander, whom the Jews had put forward, and Alexander, motioning with his hand, wanted to make a defence to the crowd. But when they recognised that he was a Jew, for about two hours they all cried out with one voice, Great is Artemis of the Ephesians! And when the town clerk had quieted the crowd, he said, Men of Ephesus, who is there who does not know that the city of the Ephesians is temple keeper of the great Artemis, and of the sacred stone that fell from the sky? Seeing then that these things cannot be denied, you ought to be quiet and do nothing rash. For you have brought these men here who are neither sacrilegious nor blasphemers of our goddess. If therefore Demetrius and the craftsmen with him have a complaint against anyone, the courts are open, and there are proconsuls. Let them bring charges against one another. But if you seek anything further, it shall be settled in the regular assembly.

For we really are in danger of being charged with rioting today, since there is no cause that we can give to justify this commotion. And when he had said these things, he dismissed the assembly.

At the end of Acts chapter 19, Paul is still in Ephesus, where he has been for a few years now. The hero might even be wondering if he will settle in Ephesus for the long term, expanding his influential school there. However, Paul's eyes now turn to the next stage of his mission. He is primarily a travelling missionary, not a settled teacher. His plan is to pass back through Macedonia and Achaia, and then go back to Jerusalem. The purpose of this itinerary seems to be in part one of gathering a collection for the saints in Jerusalem. He has already delivered aid to Jerusalem back at the end of chapter 11. It was at this juncture that Paul seems to have written 1 Corinthians. He describes his travel plans in more detail in 1 Corinthians chapter 16 verses 1 to 12.

[3 : 3 4] Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do. On the first day of every week, each one of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come. And when I arrive, I will send those whom you accredit by letter to carry your gift to Jerusalem. If it seems advisable that I should go also, they will accompany me. I will visit you after passing through Macedonia, for I intend to pass through Macedonia, and perhaps I will stay with you or even spend the winter, so that you may help me on my journey wherever I go. For I do not want to see you now just in passing. I hope

to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits. But I will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost, for a wide door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many adversaries.

When Timothy comes, see that you put him at ease among you, for he is doing the work of the Lord, as I am. So let no one despise him. Help him on his way in peace, that he may return to me, for I am expecting him with the brothers. Now concerning our brother Apollos, I strongly urged him to visit you with the other brothers, but it was not at all his will to come now. He will come when he has opportunity. This time seems to have been an important epistle writing period for Paul. During the conclusion of his time in Ephesus, he wrote 1 Corinthians. After leaving Ephesus and passing through Macedonia, he would write 2 Corinthians. At some point on the return leg of his journey to Jerusalem, he would write Romans. Romans chapter 15 verses 23 to 28 gives further indication both of the time of its writing, of Paul's further travel plans at the time, and also of the purpose of the collection for the saints in Jerusalem.

But now, since I no longer have any room for work in these regions, and since I have longed for many years to come to you, I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be helped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a while. At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints, for Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. For they were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings. When therefore I have completed this, and have delivered to them what has been collected, I will leave for Spain by way of you. The collection for the saints in Jerusalem was a concrete expression of the unity of the church, of the bringing together of Jews and Gentiles. There might have been few, if any, Gentiles in the church in Jerusalem, but such a gift was a way of expressing the bond that existed between the different parts of the church of Christ. This was one of the reasons why Paul's missionary journeys, his epistle writing, and his gift collecting were so essential.

They knit together churches scattered throughout the empire, establishing a unified and communicating network, where otherwise there might have been isolated and divergent groups. It is interesting, however, that in the book of Acts, we do not have the same emphasis upon the collection for the saints in Jerusalem as we do in the Pauline epistles. This might be surprising. One can imagine that an emphasis upon the collection for the saints in Jerusalem would bring the story full circle. It would be a way of expressing the way that the Gentiles were being included in the pattern of giving to each other and supporting each other that was so emphasised in the pattern of life of the Jerusalem church. It would also underline the unity of Jew and Gentile in a single body supporting each other, confirming the message of the Jerusalem council. The fact that this theme is present, but very clearly put to the background, might be an indication that the themes that Luke foregrounds are of extreme importance in his mind. Only a theme of such prominence and significance might explain why these themes are not so emphasised. Paul sends Timothy and Erastus ahead to prepare the way for him.

[7 : 34] This is particularly important because they need to prepare the gift of the churches, to give the churches time to gather something together. Paul's expression of his need to go to Jerusalem and then on to Rome might remind us of the geographical destiny that was marked out for the church's mission at the beginning of the book of Acts. Jerusalem and all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth. It might also remind us of Christ's purposeful movement towards Jerusalem in the gospel. Like his master, Paul has a destiny to fulfil and that destiny involves travel to two key destinations. Paul's success and the success of the way, the name for the early Christian movement at the time, leads to disturbance in Ephesus. The Jews had opposed him earlier when he had been teaching in the synagogue, but now persecution is instigated by pagan idolaters. Paul is largely absent from this particular episode, which focuses upon Demetrius and the mob that he forms, literally the Ecclesia, a chaotic parody of the true assembly of the people of God. We might, as Daryl Bach notes, have an allusion to this event in 2 Corinthians chapter 1 verses 8 to 10.

For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia, for we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death, but that was to make us rely not on ourselves, but on God who raises the dead.

He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again. Bach, along with other commentators, observes that Luke seems to have

particularly robust sources for the events in this section, with a seemingly strong local knowledge. The unrest that we read of at the end of this chapter is similar to other events that we read of in first century settings. It is entirely believable in its context. The disturbance is provoked by the concerns of Demetrius and other Ephesian craftsmen that the success of Paul's labours are threatening the success of their trades, which depend heavily upon the demand from a now decreasing pool of idolaters. A host of commercial enterprises rested upon the cult of Artemis, or Diana, as she was known in Roman religion. Her temple in Ephesus was tremendously large. According to some estimates, it was four times the size of the Parthenon, and much larger than a football pitch. Her cult was hugely influential, and the commerce surrounding it correspondingly immense. Support for the cult of Artemis in Ephesus seems to have arisen in part from the falling of a meteorite in the region, as the town clerk notes in verse 35. Demetrius is a silversmith, and he makes silver shrines of Artemis. Perhaps his construction of idolatrous things through silver might be contrasted with the way that the disciples destroyed a vast quantity of books that were worth an incredible amount of silver in the verses preceding. Demetrius gathers together the craftsmen and the workmen and rouses them to action by alerting them to the fact that their trade is going to suffer if Paul's mission succeeds. The more that Paul gains followers, the more that demand for their services, for their products, will diminish. So much of the commerce of the city depends upon the cult of Artemis, and the civic pride of the place also. He is concerned that not only will there be less demand for their products, they may even start to come into general disrepute, people starting to look upon the worship of idols and the trade that surrounds them, as something to be rejected as false and depraved religion. Given the success that Paul had been having in the region, this was not an entirely unreasonable fear. The response of the craftsmen and the workmen is anger, and the commotion that they cause spreads throughout the city, so that all sorts of people are joining in in a movement they do not entirely understand. They rush to the theatre and take with them Gaius and Aristarchus, who have been Paul's companions from Macedonia. One of the things that is revealed here is the mercenary character of both pagan and Jewish worship, so much that presents itself as piety, is really about business concerns, about the service of mammon. What's also happening here is an anticipation of the riot that will occur in Jerusalem, when Paul is taken in the temple, presumably because he has defiled it when he has done no such thing. The disciples surrounding Paul do not allow him to go into the assembly in the theatre, while people would not be able to prevent him going to Jerusalem, where they knew that he faced imprisonment. Here they do have success.

Paul has friends also among the Asiarchs, rulers of the city, who also persuade him not to go into the theatre. Recognising the parallels between this account and the story a few chapters later of Paul being taken in the temple, we might see some sort of parallel being drawn between the temple and the theatre. In the confusion and the commotion, many in the crowd do not know why they have been assembled. Some of the crowd put forward a Jew named Alexander, who wants to make a defence to the assembly. It is not impossible that this Alexander was the same Alexander the coppersmith that Paul refers to in 2 Timothy chapter 4 verse 14, a man who according to that text caused him much harm.

[12:46] However, as Alexander is recognised to be a Jew, he is considered by the general crowd to be aligned with Paul. Like Paul, he is a Jew who opposes the idolatry of the city. Their response is to cry out in support of Artemis for almost two hours. Finally, the town clerk is able to bring some quiet to the situation. He settles the crowd and delivers a speech. As he points out, neither Paul nor his companions had committed sacrilege. They did not blaspheme Artemis. Paul and his disciples did not have an iconoclastic approach to pagan artefacts. They were respectful and they kept the peace. Paul had friends among the authorities of the city, among the Asiarchs. Throughout the epistles of the New Testament, the posture of Christians in society is described as one of keeping peace, of not causing nuisance, of not being busybodies, of being at peace with people around and seeking to be held in high repute by all. The anger of Demetrius and the other craftsmen are without grounds. If they had any reasonable grounds for complaints against Paul, the courts are open. They can go to them. However, they are the ones causing a disturbance. They are the ones that are really the threat to the city. The city of

Ephesus enjoys a free city status and if it has commotion and riots like this, it may find that status severely curtailed. Demetrius and his companions are the ones that are really putting the city at risk.

A question to consider. Reading this account, how can it help us to understand the way in which the church did and did not turn the world upside down?