

Acts 19: Wild Times at Ephesus

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On his third missionary journey in Acts 19, Paul came back to the city of Ephesus, which he had visited only for a short time on his second journey. His three year stay in Ephesus took up the majority of his time and activity on his third and last missionary journey recorded in Acts. Ephesus was a major city in the Roman Empire, and was considered the second largest city behind Rome. Ephesus was a major port located on the Cayster River where it emptied into the Aegean Sea. The Temple of Artemis in Ephesus was one of the ancient Seven Wonders of the World in the first century, and would be a major source of trouble for Paul and the early church. Luke explained the importance of Paul's work in Ephesus in Acts 19:10, "so that all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks." During Paul's long stay there, he and his disciples no doubt ventured into all the surrounding cities of Asia Minor and planted churches. The emphasis of Paul's ministry in Ephesus was about how powerfully the Word of God impacted Ephesus, as recorded by Acts 19:20, "So the word of the Lord was growing mightily and prevailing."

The Power of Proclaiming God's Word

In Acts 19:8-10, the power of the gospel began with Paul proclaiming boldly in the synagogue for three months until they became hardened against it and began speaking against Christ. Paul then withdrew, and found a better pulpit to speak boldly from at the school of Tyrannus. This was probably a lecture hall, and Tyrannus was a convert of Paul's who taught at the school and let Paul speak there on a regular basis. Paul was so bold and outspoken in Ephesus and the surrounding regions that the text says everyone was exposed to the gospel in all the area.

The Confirmation of God at the Important Time

God was enabling Paul to regularly do extraordinary miracles as incontrovertible evidence that the gospel was true. This was a major period of transition in which it was necessary for God to intervene in the natural order to authenticate Paul's message. The goofy superstitious Ephesians thought there was power in Paul, or even Paul's clothes and handkerchiefs, so they were taking his stuff to try and heal people. God blessed them in spite of their ignorance possibly because they were sincerely believing in Christ and there was no personal gain. You can imagine the crowds that gathered to hear Paul speak when the word spread about the miracles.

Exposing False Prophets

One problem God's people have always had might be called competition from false prophets or false teachers. Charlatans have been present in the church for 2000 years trying to mislead people for ill gotten gains. One of the funniest stories in the Bible occurred in Ephesus while Paul was ministering there. In Acts 19:13-16, seven sons of a Jewish priest, who were probably making a lot of money posing as exorcists/sorcerers, saw Paul cast out evil spirits using the name of Jesus. This looked very promising to them since they had probably had to use slight of hand before, but what Paul was doing was the real thing. They approached a guy (let's call him Mongo) who really was possessed by an evil spirit, and said, "I adjure you by Jesus whom Paul preaches" to come out. Their failure would be because they didn't know or believe in Jesus, but were trying to use His name like a secret formula or incantation. Because of Acts 19:19, we know that black magic and the occult was a big deal in Ephesus, and these seven sons were right in the middle of it.

The evil spirit, Mongo, answered them in such a way as to expose their lack of belief in God and their lack of authority from God, "I recognize (the authority of) Jesus, and I know about Paul, but who are you?" The evil spirit was saying, "You gotta be kidding me thinking you bums can boss me around? Who are you but fallen beings even lower than me? Mongo is now gonna give you the worst whipping of your life. I'm gonna beat you so bad your own Momma won't recognize you." Mongo jumped on those seven boys and battered and defrocked them. The text says that Mongo "subdued" all of them, then "overpowered" them, ripped off their clothes, pounded on them for a while until finally they fled out of the house "naked and wounded". Try to imagine that wild scene. They had probably drawn a crowd to watch them perform the exorcism, but then the crowd was

treated to a circus act that would amaze and frighten the whole town. Verse 17 says that “this became known to all...and fear fell upon them all, and the name of the Lord Jesus was being magnified.” Once again God had used the evil intentions of man to bring about good. We can assume that those who opposed Paul would wish that the seven sons had succeeded, but the attempt of false teachers to compete with Paul was not only defeated, but it backfired big time.

The Fear of God

Because of the wild story about the exorcist/sorcerers, fear fell upon the whole city, and Luke wrote that Jesus was magnified and respected. The seven sons were living proof to all that Jesus was real and powerful. If you are like me you may be thinking that it is strange that based on what a demon did, Jesus was magnified. Apparently, it was clear that a true believer in Jesus like Paul was very effective, but scoundrels like the seven sons trying to misuse Jesus’ name were crushed. People probably went to see the seven sons to verify the story. I can imagine those guys had black eyes, missing teeth, cut lips, broken arms, or maybe even full body casts. They were great witnesses for Christ.

The conviction of their sin involving black magic was a direct result of this story. Many who had been practicing black magic, repented, confessed, and believed in Jesus. How clear was their repentance? Acts 19:19 tells us that many brought their books of spells and incantations all together for a public disclosure of their change of life by burning the evil books. In order to explain how many did this and the great price they gave up, the text tells us the cost of the destroyed books was 50,000 pieces of silver. Luke gave us a summary statement in verse 20 of the activity of Paul and the powerful effect of the Word of God, “So the word of the Lord was growing mightily and prevailing.”

Ho Hum, Just Another Riot in the Life of Paul

Now that we know that Paul’s ministry in Ephesus was greatly blessed by God, and the churches in that area were multiplying and thousands were becoming Christians; we should be expecting a reaction from the other side. Surely the adversary was marshalling his forces for a counter attack. In Acts 19:23-34, the opposition to the church and Paul’s teaching, exploded into a wild chaotic riot in Ephesus. The unseen cause of the riot was of course spiritual warfare. The enemy’s best weapon is usually economic gain or loss. The motivation of the fake exorcists was in gaining money, but the riot was caused by a fear of losing money. The riot was started by a silversmith, who had quite a prosperous business making souvenir idols of Artemis. That Greek goddess was worshipped as the goddess of fertility there in Ephesus, and a great Temple of Artemis had been built that became famous as one of the Seven Wonders of the World. The tourists flocked there to visit it, and a thriving marketplace was developed around it. The silversmith Demetrius, was successful at convincing all the idol makers and merchants in Ephesus that Paul’s teaching against idolatry would ruin them and their religion. Probably this all took place during or just after the annual Spring Festival of Artemis. Sales were way down, and the silversmith was just trying to protect his “license to steal”. Demetrius gathered all the artisans and vendors, and made an impassioned speech recorded in Acts 19:25-27. He convinced them that they would be out of business, and the whole city would decline, not to mention their religion. It is interesting that his primary concern was that the tourists were down, business was down, the prestige of the temple and city was suffering, and oh yeah, our religion might be hurt. His audience was filled with rage, and the whole city was filled with confusion as a riot ensued. The mob could not find Paul, so they grabbed up some of his companions and dragged them into the town amphitheater that held about 12,000 people. For some time the crowd shouted “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians”. Apparently most of them were confused about what was going on, they thought it was a pep rally, but finally the city manager was able to quiet the crowd, and pacify them by saying that the matter should be brought into a court by Demetrius and let the proconsuls settle it.

Before telling this story about the riot, Luke let us know in Acts 19:21-22 that Paul was planning to leave Ephesus anyway. His plan was to go through Macedonia and Greece to collect a donation for the impoverished Jerusalem church. After delivering the offering to the church in Jerusalem, Paul said, “I must see Rome.” Therefore Paul ended his third missionary journey, and headed for Macedonia.

The Paradoxical Nature of the Church

History and experience teaches that the church thrives under persecution. The harsher the treatment, the better the church, and the other side of the coin is that the rich churches without persecution tend to stink up the place. Therefore we see in the

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book of Acts that all the opposition, persecution, and martyrdom that occurred only served to grow the church and make it true. The church is God's "light" in a dark world, and the world does not want a spotlight on its true nature.

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