

Week 33

The Riot in Ephesus

Cultures Collide

The riot in Ephesus, as mentioned in Acts chapter 19:23-41, was a significant event in the history of the early Christian movement, in this we see the cultural collision that was/is inevitable when the gospel is preached and lived out. The riot sparked by a conflict between the followers of Paul, who preached that "gods made by human hands are no gods at all" (Acts 19:26), and the silversmiths who made silver shrines of Artemis, the patron goddess of Ephesus. The silversmiths, led by Demetrius, feared that Paul's message would undermine their business and the honor of Artemis, who was widely worshiped throughout Asia and the world, in other words – their very way of life.

They stirred up a mob that seized Gaius and Aristarchus, two of Paul's companions from Macedonia, and dragged them into the theater, a large open-air venue that could usually hold up to 25,000 people. The theater was also a place where civic assemblies were held, and where political and religious issues were debated. The crowd shouted, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" for about two hours, creating a chaotic scene. As in many large public demonstrations it seems, some of the people didn't even know why they were there.

Some may have tried to defend Paul and his associates, such as Alexander, a Jew who was pushed to the front by his fellow Jews but was shouted down by the crowd, although we have don't know for sure what Alexander said. In Paul's 2nd letter to Timothy, he mentions an Alexander who did him much harm, perhaps the same person.

The riot was finally quelled by the city clerk, who was a high-ranking official responsible for maintaining public order and representing the interests of Rome. He appealed to the crowd's civic pride and sense of justice, reminding them that Ephesus was the guardian of the temple of Artemis and that her image had fallen from heaven, according to their belief. He also warned them of the legal consequences of rioting without cause and advised them to settle their grievances in a lawful manner. He then dismissed the assembly and dispersed the crowd.

The individuals named in this account have different roles and significance in Paul's ministry and in the context of Ephesus. Paul was the apostle to the Gentiles, who had spent about three years in Ephesus, teaching in the synagogue and in the lecture hall of Tyrannus, performing miracles, and spreading the gospel throughout Asia. He had planned to leave Ephesus after the riot and continue his journey to Jerusalem and Rome (Acts 19:21; 20:1). Gaius and Aristarchus were Paul's traveling companions from Macedonia, who had accompanied him on his third missionary journey. They were also among the seven men who went ahead of Paul to Troas (Acts 20:4-5). Aristarchus was later mentioned as Paul's fellow prisoner on his voyage to Rome (Acts 27:2). Demetrius was the leader of the silversmiths who instigated the riot against Paul. He was motivated by economic interests and religious zeal, as he claimed that Paul's message threatened their trade and the honor of Artemis. He also appealed to the craftsmen's sense of identity and solidarity, calling them "friends" and "fellow craftsmen" (Acts 19:25). Alexander was a Jew who was pushed forward by his fellow Jews to make a defense before the crowd. His exact motives are unclear, but he may have wanted to distance himself and his community from Paul and his message, or he may have wanted to take advantage of the situation to speak

against idolatry. However, he was not given a chance to speak, as the crowd recognized him as a Jew and rejected him. The city clerk was an influential official who had authority over public affairs and civic assemblies in Ephesus. He was also a representative of Rome, who had to ensure that Ephesus remained loyal and peaceful under Roman rule. He used his rhetorical skills and political savvy to calm down the crowd and prevent further violence. He also showed some respect for Paul and his companions, acknowledging that they had not committed any crime against Artemis or her temple.

The riots in Ephesus also reveal some of the struggles of the pagan Greeks and the Jews who were not part of the Christian movement. The pagan Greeks were devoted to their traditional gods and goddesses, especially Artemis, who was considered their protector and benefactor. They valued their religious freedom and cultural identity, which they felt were threatened by Paul's message of monotheism and salvation through Jesus Christ. They also depended on their religious practices for their economic livelihood, as they made and sold idols, offered sacrifices, and participated in festivals. They were easily swayed by demagogues like Demetrius, who appealed to their emotions and prejudices. The Jews were a minority group in Ephesus, who had their own synagogue and followed their own laws and customs. They worshiped the God of Israel but did not accept Jesus as their Messiah or Savior. They faced hostility and discrimination from both the Romans and the Greeks, who often accused them of being anti-social and subversive. They also had conflicts with Paul and his followers, who they saw as heretics and apostates. They tried to distance themselves from the Christians but were often lumped together with them by the pagans, who did not distinguish between different sects of Judaism.

In a pluralistic society like that of the 1st century, cultures often co-existed with little conflict. However, the gospel of Jesus Christ appeared on the scene to draw “all” people to salvation, which put it at odds with all other religions. Christianity was not meant to be one more religion amongst many others, it was given to reconcile humanity with God the Creator and Father of all.

Today, we are once again living in a pluralistic society, not unlike that of Paul’s times. Our culture promotes tolerance at the expense of truth. In such times, the clashing of cultures will be inevitable as the truth of the gospel is presented. The good news is, the gospel of Jesus can transform cultures when preached and lived out authentically with a love for all, and with no compromise for truth.

c. Paul in Ephesus (19:1-41)

1. The Twelve Men (1-7)
2. In the Synagogue & School of Tyrannus (8-10)
3. God Confirming Paul's Message by Miracles (11, 12)
4. Seven Sons of Sceva (13-17)
5. Mass Repentance (18, 19)
6. A Summary Report of the Church in Asia (20)
7. Paul's Statement of His Plans: Jerusalem & Rome (21, 22)
8. The Riot in Ephesus

