

Acts 19:21–41

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning. If you are finding yourself here at Holy Trinity Church for the first time, the warmest of welcomes. We are one of four congregations that assemble regularly on Sundays throughout the city. It's a joy to be together. My name is Bing. I'm part of the pastoral team.

If I have the opportunity to greet you in person, I would love that. As we get started, let's just pause for prayer. Father, your word declares, worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and created.

Worthy are you who was slain to receive power and wealth, wisdom and might, and honor and glory and blessing. And so, Father, we come, and we want to acknowledge your worth, your infinite worth, your forever worth, that you will never cease being worthy of all adoration and praise.

And so, in our moments together, we bring what little we have to declare to ourselves and to one another that Christ is of infinite worth.

And so, through the risen Christ, by your Spirit, would you speak through your word this morning. We ask these things for Jesus' sake. Amen. In professional sports, there is an acronym, GOAT, G-O-A-T, which stands for the greatest of all time.

[1 : 43] Being in the city of Chicago, this discussion frequently arises, given the fact that Michael Jordan played an essential part of securing six NBA titles in this great city.

More recently, or in past decades, the conversation arises frequently, because new basketball players have emerged, some with nicknames such as King James.

As the World Cup winds down toward crowning a champion, the world laments the fact that two of the best players in the world are no longer playing, because their teams have been eliminated.

Despite their accolades and their personal accomplishments, can they still be considered the greatest of all time if they did not lead their respective countries to World Cup championships? This discussion inevitably surfaces as new athletes and players ascend in each new generation. Older generations claim that their GOATs, claim their GOATs, and new generations claim theirs.

[2 : 52] New players arise to prominence, and their fans and their followers assert their place in the discussion to be the greatest of all time. At some level, this is what is occurring in this morning's text.

The city of Ephesus was renowned for being the gatekeeper to the goddess Artemis. She was daughter of Zeus, known in the Roman world as Diana.

She was a virgin goddess who aided women in childbirth. She was god of the hunt. She was the goddess of death. She was seen as the mother goddess, and her renown only increased through syncretism.

And you see this because Ephesus drew many, many people from all over the Roman Empire. And as these visitors came, they would attribute things, more and more things, to Artemis.

Artemis became the all-encompassing goddess. Historians tell us she grew in her goddessness as her adherents grew in number.

[4 : 00] Her temple was massive, larger than a present-day football field, whether it be soccer or American football, with columns rising 60 feet into the sky to suspend this temple.

It was the largest structure in the entire Greek world. Her shrine was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

Her fame was wide-reaching. Archaeologists tell us there were at least 33 other temples or shrines made to her through the empire.

There was a week-long festival attributed to her that would draw thousands into Ephesus. So much commerce happened in Ephesus that it actually became the banking center of Asia.

It would not be an exaggeration to assert that the worship of Artemis was the most widely followed in the entire Greco-Roman world.

[4 : 59] Well, given Christianity's arrival to Ephesus, there was destined to be a collision.

What would happen when Artemis met Jesus? Though speaking hyperbolically in 1910, Luke records for us that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord.

But Luke wasn't exaggerating because later on in verse 17 and 18, it reads this, Great fear fell upon all the residents of Ephesus, and the name of the Lord Jesus was extolled or lifted up.

Also, many of those who are now believers came and they confessed and divulged their practices. And so what you have occurring in the city of Ephesus is this.

This is Artemis' city. But Jesus has arrived. A new God was coming to the forefront. There was a changing civil and religious landscape in Ephesus.

[6 : 12] The content and conversations were arguments around this. Who is the greatest of all time? How would Jesus fare in this discussion?

How would the gospel of Jesus Christ hold up against Artemis? With the ascendancy of a new God, could Jesus hold his own?

What would happen when Jesus met Artemis? Well, the clash, according to Luke, is no little disturbance. He always writes no little disturbance, which pretty much means in verse 23, it was a big deal.

It was a big deal. It was causing local magicians already, local magicians, exorcists, and those who like to dabble in magic, to confess and divulge their practices.

We see that in 19 verse 18. They took and burned their books, so much so that it was valued up to 50,000 pieces of silver. Jesus was at work, and it was visibly manifest by the demonstration of some giving up their deceptive occupations at great personal cost.

[7 : 20] And it's worth pausing right here, because this is one of the greatest legitimizations of the Christian faith. It's the visible demonstration of the Christian towards self-sacrifice, selflessness, displayed in the radical abandonment of that which is sinful.

How do you know that you're a Christian? Well, it's easy. There is an inner compulsion to hate sin, and there's an outward demonstration that manifests it.

In this instance, and we see this in Ephesus, for the past few chapters, we have largely been following God's instrument, Paul the Apostle.

And our text opens up in verse 21 with the homestretch of the book of Acts. It appears maybe incidental, as if Luke is just trying to fast-forward us through the narrative. But Paul has been in Ephesus for two and a half to three years.

He will stay in Ephesus longer than any other city. How will Luke conclude his document? Well, he gives us a clue in verse 21.

[8 : 32] Now, after these events, Paul resolved in the spirit to pass through Macedonia and Achaia and to go to Jerusalem, saying, after I have been there, I must also see Rome. For the first time in the book of Acts, Luke acknowledges that Paul's mission is to get to Rome.

His desire is to see Rome. It's more than a tourist saying, hey, I'm in Europe, I gotta see Venice. It's more than that. It's dictated by this must.

I must. It's this divine origin of purpose that Jesus had. When Jesus said, I must go to Jerusalem. Well, for Paul, there is a divine pull toward Rome.

And in this morning, we will read of a human push out of Ephesus toward Rome for Paul.

Structurally, I've broken our text into three parts, which I hope will guide our time this morning.

The first part, verses 23 through 27, we read of a concerned craftsman. A concerned craftsman. In the second part, we read of a confused crowd.

[9 : 41] A confused crowd. And lastly, our text closes from 35 to 41 with a competent clerk. A competent clerk.

A confused, or a concerned, I'm confused all of a sudden. A concerned craftsman. A confused crowd. A competent clerk.

Firstly, a concerned craftsman. The narrative opens up with a concerned craftsman by the name of Demetrius. Demetrius may be considered perceptive.

He somehow anticipates, hey, Paul is saying this message that gods made with gods are not gods at all. He figured out that this would eventually lead to economic loss on his part.

So he gathered the guild of craftsmen or the local union together and he sounds the alarm. It doesn't take much to put yourself into his shoes. He was a craftsman whose primary means of income is being disrupted.

[10:45] He worked with his hands fashioning silver shrines, trinkets of sorts for those who found their way to Ephesus. If you ever have an opportunity to visit a well-traveled tourist location, you'll encounter characters like Demetrius.

If you find yourself in Paris, you'll see little Eiffel Towers for sale all over the place. If you find yourself in New York, you will find little replicas of the Statue of Liberty all over this place. Why? Because segments of locals have found this little niche in the local market to cater to tourists selling the pride of their city. This is somewhat what is at play in Ephesus.

But it goes further in Ephesus because they're not only catering to tourists in Ephesus, they're catering to local Ephesian residents and followers of Artemis.

These small idols, these replicas, these statues were purchased by locals when they would enter Artemis' temple.

[11:51] They would be offered sacrificially. A close analogy would be if you ever have an opportunity to visit Asia, there are many shrines and temples of various religious sorts.

And if you walk into a Buddhist temple, you have an opportunity to buy two things. One, you can buy sticks of incense. Or two, you can buy fake paper money. And you would enter into the temple or this shrine, and you are given the opportunity to sacrifice or to burn the incense and the fake paper money to this deity as a means of reverence, worship, exaltation.

See, that's part of what's happening. They would not only, the silversmith would not only sell to tourists, but would sell to local residents because as local residents went into Artemis' temple, they were expected to bring offerings.

Demetrius was likely a good accountant. He had good records. As he totaled up his receipts from the end of the day, he was noticing a trend. His income was on a downward trajectory, and when compared to previous years, he noticed a steady decline.

And he starts to ask the question, what is causing this? Well, for Demetrius, the text tells us in verse 26, it was the persuasive power of Paul.

[13:17] more accurately, it was the seizing power of the gospel message. See, Christians were affecting the economy, and it's not, they were affecting the economy so much so that Demetrius began to feel its effects.

And it's not strange, actually, in antiquity, because 50 years after this episode in Ephesus, there's a guy named Pliny the Younger. He's a governor of the province of Asia, and he was known as governor, he would correspond with Rome.

And it's interesting, he writes to the emperor, Trajan at this time, and he calls, hey, this whole superstition thing, these followers of Jesus are superstitious.

And it's not only confined to the cities, but it's spread through all the villages and rural districts, and they're posing a threat to the economy, because people are buying fewer sacrificial animals, and they're buying less fodder, fodder, right?

Fodder, to feed these animals. See, Christians were actually affecting the economy. As a result, Pliny the Younger says he would increase persecution against them.

[14:34] Well, Demetrius' primary concern to summarize in verse 27, it's twofold. The diminishing of personal trade, loss of jobs, and secondly, the discrediting of the great goddess Artemis and her magnificence.

It is both a personal disruption, and it is a civic, religious disruption that concerned Demetrius. See, Demetrius' remarks about the universal adoration of Artemis are not exaggerated.

one historian writing about a hundred years after this, say, all cities, he writes, all cities worship Artemis of the Ephesians. Individuals hold her in honor above all gods, and he gives reasons. Three of the reasons are this, the size of the temple, surpassing all the buildings among men, the eminence of the city of the Ephesians, and the renown of the goddess who dwells there.

For Demetrius, it was a fear of financial loss. But we have to see the flip side of this as well. We have to acknowledge that the gospel was having its effects.

[15:48] Because when the gospel apprehends an individual, there will be repercussions of how the individual spends their money and constructs their identity.

At first, these may be small personal changes hidden from the public, but eventually they become public. We are a people that forsake sin.

See, what's staggering here is that in Ephesus, there wasn't a campaign to stomp out magic or sorcerers.

There wasn't committees that the Christians all got together and said, hey, we're going to just denounce this and denounce this and tell everyone what we hate. no.

What happened is the faithful presence of Christians began to serve as a witness to the watching public.

[16:48] That's what's happening in North Kenwood. Because our community groups could have gotten together and said, we're, well, I got to be careful because there was a group in Chicago that blocked an entire tollway yesterday.

denouncing violence as we should. There is a way that Christianity confronts and challenges and speaks out against culture.

That's one way. But there's another way that Christ in culture bringing transformation that our groups in Kenwood said, hey, we're not going to hold up signs though we can.

we're not going to necessarily write letters and denounce everything that Christians are against.

Rather, we're going to be present. We're going to hold this block party at personal expense with the hope that a conversation, a relationship may emerge so that one day they'll ask the question, well, why did you do that?

Why do you hold block parties? Well, you can envision it, can't you? The businessman in Ephesus saying, hey, every year for my bonus I usually buy silver shrines and I give them to my employees because we had a great year.

[18:18] And then his assistant says, hey, are you going to buy the shrines this year? And he says, no, I'm not going to buy the shrines this year. Why are you not going to buy the shrines? I want to give them a book. A book! Why would you give them a book?

Well, I'm not going to buy shrines anymore because the gospel has seized me and has begun to transform me and change the way I think.

And instead of buying silver shrines, I want to buy books that tell my employees about the saving power of Jesus. And that's what's happening here in Ephesus, and that's what's happening in North Kenwood.

The relationships are there. The block party is held. Why? Well, yeah, I denounce violence. Yeah, absolutely. But can I tell you the gospel?

Can I tell you about the saving work of the Lord Jesus Christ? Well, Demetrius is concerned and he's alarmed simply because the Christians are being good Christians.

[19:25] The public witness of the gospel is dismantling the private gain of Demetrius. And when people's pocketbooks are threatened and their civic pride is attacked, it's easy to see what unfolds in verse 28.

There is a confused crowd. A confused crowd. The artisans are outraged and the city is set into confusion. A procession of residents head toward the theater and set about chanting great is Artemis of the Ephesians.

In disarray, a large portion of the city makes its way likely into the theater in Ephesus. Incidentally, it still stands to this day. It's able to accommodate 20 to 25 thousand people.

And on the way, unable to locate Paul, they settle for two other fellows, Gaius and Aristarchus. As the city is in turmoil, on the verge of rioting, Paul catches wind of what's going on.

And knowing Paul, he says, hey, I gotta get there. If that's where the action is, I gotta go. And so he proposes it to his buddies, the other disciples, and they say, no way. No way are you going in.

[20:34] Another group of fellows known as the Asiarchs say, no way, Paul, are you going in there. Why? Well, it shows us how hostile that crowd was.

See, the Asiarchs are no insignificant group of people. They were elected officials who were civic rulers and resided in the upper class.

They were in charge of the city council and the city's administration. Paul had somehow befriended them, and they urged him not to enter into the theater. And rightly so, because there was a danger. And both the disciples and the Asiarchs feared this, that Paul, if you go into that crowd, it's unlikely you're going to walk back out. Well, the crowd is confused.

Some were shouting one thing, while others something else. We are to envision complete disorder. Humorously, Luke records that the majority of the crowd wasn't even certain why they were gathering.

[21 : 35] Why are you here? Well, because someone is dissing Artemis. Why are you here? Well, because I heard I'm going to lose my job. Why are you here? I heard there's pizza. Well, we are to get a picture of a restless and uncontrollable mob.

So Paul is restrained from entering. But this poor fellow, Alexander, as Paul is restrained from entering, poor Alexander is pushed forward to enter and to make a statement.

Who is this Alexander fellow? The best guess, I think, is he's some guy who is put forward to defend Judaism. Apparently, the leading Jews were concerned that the crowd wasn't able to distinguish the followers of Jesus and the followers of Judaism.

See, both were monotheists. Both would affirm that gods made by hands are not gods at all. But the hope was that Alexander would say something to say, we are not them.

We're not Christians. But the crowd would have none of it. All they cared about that he was not a worshiper of Artemis, so they kind of drove him out, drowned him out with unrelenting shouts.

[22 : 52] Two hours the shouts persisted. Confusion lasted, chaos endured. The crowd was confused why they may have been gathering, but they certainly were not confused about Artemis, the great Artemis of the Ephesians.

See, Artemis was forever related, a historian right, to the well-being of Ephesus. The principal force of her cult or her religious following was interrelated into the entire city's urban life, the civic, the economic, the educational, the patriotic, the administrative, the commercial facets.

There was no other city, this historian would write, in the empire, whose body, soul, and spirit was so belonged to a particular deity as Ephesus did to her patron goddess Artemis.

And here we have nationalistic religion, where faith and state are tethered together. As Artemis goes, so goes Ephesus. As Ephesus goes, so goes Artemis.

Civic and religious life were tangled, inseparable. How dare you threaten our city? How dare you threaten our religion? And we're left to ponder what would Paul have said?

[24 : 11] Both Gaius and Aristarchus are silent in this narrative. Luke doesn't give us any commentary, which is surprising.

We see a concerned craftsman, we see a confused crowd, and we close with a competent clerk. A competent clerk.

The commotion is quieted by the town clerk. We're not to picture a lowly accountant who merely kept records. Instead, the town clerk is the highest civic official in the city.

He operated as her manager. He was the liaison to Rome. In other words, he was the chief representative of the city, the main keeper of the temple.

So all the people standing in the crowd would know what to do when he stood. There was no one more able to address the crowd than this clerk, and his competency is on display.

[25 : 18] At this point, though the text doesn't explicitly state it, it would be hard to believe that the town clerk would be unfamiliar with Christianity. It's been there for already almost three years.

What was going on in Ephesus is not hidden in a corner. Yet he does not speak ill of the Christian faith. Instead, with great level-headedness, he acknowledges the divinity of Artemis.

Apparently, she fell from the heavens as a meteorite. He defends the Christians against the accusations of blasphemy and sacrilege, declaring them innocent. Instead, he confronts Demetrius and the silversmith union, telling them to make use of the proper channels and bringing charges against another.

The commotion that they had stirred up is putting the city in danger. Ephesus at that time was an independent city under Roman rule, and it had, though under Roman rule, it had great freedoms. And the town clerk was aware of this. And he said, hey, if we keep on keeping on what we're doing, Rome's going to catch wind, and then we're going to either get fined, punished, or shut down.

[26 : 25] Our city will be endangered. So Luke ends this episode with a literary play on words. First, it was Demetrius that felt endangered by the Christians in verse 27, when in reality, the episode closes with, Demetrius, you've endangered our city in verse 40.

The assembly is dismissed, the episode is over, and if we peek into the next chapter, verse 1, after the uproar ceases, Paul sent for his disciples, and after encouraging them, he said farewell and departed for Macedonia.

The charges are dropped and peace was restored. Christianity was not forbidden or banned from Ephesus. If there was opposition toward Christians, it wasn't coming from Rome.

In other words, Luke wants to uphold and preserve the legitimacy of the Christian faith. This is not some new cultic movement of a group of individuals hiding in some religious compound, doing hidden magic, engaged in mysterious affairs, threatening civil society.

Their intention is not to harm the people or undermine the state. Rather, what is being done is visible to the public, accessible, and deemed reasonable and unthreatening.

[27 : 48] Luke wants us to know that the Christian faith was distinguishable from the religion of the Ephesians. It was not just another god among their gods, co-equal with their deities.

It was not a god of the Jews in the sense that it was distinguishable from Judaism. It's entirely other. It's a separate and legitimate new movement.

It's as if Christianity is on trial. In showing the dismissal of the assembly without any legitimization of the charges, Luke demonstrates Christianity's ability to stand in the Roman Empire.

In Athens, Christianity could stand against the intellectuals. In Ephesus, Christianity would stand in the Roman Empire, not as a disruptive force, but one that adhered to civic life.

Christianity was innocent. Yet the burden of the text is trying to answer the question, would the gospel prevail, even against Artemis?

[29 : 06] what is incredibly intriguing is that there appears to be little response on Luke's end. If Paul had spent three years in Ephesus, I'm sure there was other material he could have got together to formulate a rebuttal.

Why doesn't he insert some marvelous demonstration of the greatness of Jesus over Artemis? Why does Luke appear to be silent and just say, hey, they were dismissed and Paul was off?

unless in Luke's eyes, Jesus had already prevailed over Artemis.

If you ever get into a conversation about who is the greatest, there are certain names that come up. So-and-so is the greatest. And you may get in a local discussion or argument and say, no, no, no, so-and-so is greater than they, greater than them. And every now and then, someone will suggest the most absurd person.

[30 : 19] You go, no way. Better than Michael? Better than MJ? I'm not even going to talk about it. That name is not even on the radar. Perhaps that's what Luke is doing here.

Artemis? Really? Are they even in the same league? I'm telling you, we don't need to have this conversation.

And Paul would clarify this later in his letter to the church at Ephesus in the Ephesians. He says, don't you know that Christ is seated at the right hand of God?

Far above all rule and authority and power and dominion and above every name that is named, not only in this age, but also in the one to come. And you're asking me if Artemis actually stands up to Jesus?

the conversations regarding greatest of all time are always a blend of subjectivity and objectivity.

[31 : 26] I've learned that if you're holding a conversation with someone native to Chicago, there is something about upholding MJ as the greatest of all time.

In some sense, it's tethered to the identity of the city and therefore interwoven into the narratives of its inhabitants and residents. Whether you compare statistical categories or count achievements, you can present all these, but there's no avail.

Perhaps the title itself, greatest of all time, is even a moot category. Who can truly be impartial and be fair to judge given this variable of time?

And in our text, Artemis was great, arguably the greatest of the day. And Jesus was a rookie on the landscape of the Roman Empire.

And if you walk through Ephesus and you ask, hey, who's greater, Artemis or Jesus, someone might say, Jesus who? If you asked, they would say, well, definitely Artemis is greater.

[32 : 37] Look at her temple. Look at her followers. Look at her shrine. Look at the great city of Ephesus. Jesus is no rival. And you fast forward 2,000 years, and the conversation is far different, isn't it?

The questions are certainly different. In the hall of gods, little g gods, where does Artemis rank? Her temple no longer stands. Her people, her followers, are difficult to find.

The great city of Ephesus is in ruins. Time has told the story and it has attested to what once was considered greatness. So we ask, did the word of the Lord prevail?

How did Jesus prevail? Did God actually triumph in Ephesus? Well, look at his temple. It's no building.

It's a people. Look at his followers, numbering billions upon billions. look at the great city.

[33 : 48] Wait, what city you ask? Well, every city. It started in Jerusalem, made its way to Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Corinth, Athens, all the way here to Ephesus.

He made his way to London, to Paris, Tokyo, Beijing, Hong Kong, St. Petersburg, Nairobi, Cape Town, Sao Paulo, Santiago, Mexico, Vancouver, certainly Chicago.

Where you find his people, you find his reign and his rule. Where you find his adherence, you find his kingdom. And let me tell you this morning, the great Artemis bows to the Lord Jesus Christ.

And is that not our prayer this morning? That we bow to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Father, we come to you this morning. Worthy are you. Worthy are you, for you have been given a name that is above every name.

[34 : 58] That your name, every tongue in heaven and on earth and under the earth will confess that you are Lord. Lord. And this morning, whether we do so willingly or unwillingly, reluctantly or freely, hesitantly or joyfully, the truth of the matter is that one day we will all bow.

God. Oh, so Father, would you enthrone yourself in our minds, in our hearts, in our congregation, in our city, so that the chant upon our lips is great as the Lord Jesus Christ over all the earth.

We pray these things, seeking the exaltation of your Son, seeking the salvation of this city, seeking the kingdom that has already been established and will one day be fully visible on earth as it is in heaven.

We ask these things for Jesus' sake. Amen.