

Acts 19:21-41

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[0 : 00] It's good to be with you this morning.

I was a student at Princeton long ago. I had the privilege of studying God's work on the campus.

And I found out through some strange archival resources that there was a statue in Jadwin Gymnasium, which would be like the Payne Whitney of Yale, that was called the Princeton student, but it had once been called the Christian student.

The statue was originally made to remember a graduate of the class of 1879, a man named Earl Dodge, who had been the captain of the football team, the president of the Christian Student Association at the time, and a prime mover in what became the worldwide student movement called the Student Volunteers Movement that sent thousands of students to missions around the world.

The statue was of an athletic-looking man, half in football garb, half in academic gown, with books tucked under his left hand and his eyes up in a visionary gaze.

[1 : 42] On the pedestal it said, to mark the birthplace of the worldwide union of Christian students in the work for Christ. And it was commented that the ideal set forth by this figure represented the heart and center of Princeton tradition and Princeton faith.

Well, in 1929, on the night of graduation, a gathering of students with a bunch of ropes pulled down the statue.

Well, actually, the ropes weren't strong enough. They broke the ropes. But an enterprising lad went out and grabbed a tow chain from a local towing company, came back, and they pulled the statue down, and it sent shockwaves through the campus.

The toppling signaled to others the end of a Christian era and marked a cynicism, if not irreligion, among students, though some who were involved in it interpreted it more as a beer-fueled prank.

Yet, probably as well, they recognized it was born of a resentment of the ideals that that statue held. It was seen as an end of the age, and people wondered, will Christianity ever again rise at Princeton University?

[3 : 08] Will there ever be an ongoing presence of the gospel at that school? I don't know if you've thought that recently, whether it be the uproar about the Indiana Religious Freedom Act, the challenging of the accreditation of Gordon College in Massachusetts, or the recent Pew report that reported the decline of religious affiliation in America.

It feels like there's a lot of bad news today about the state of the church, about the health in America and its place in broader society. Maybe it's easy to feel like the sky is falling.

Change of pace is rapid, out of control, and a little scary. Well, friends, we aren't the first ones who have faced things like this.

Turn with me to Acts 19. We're going to be looking at a passage this morning, starting in verse 21. As you're turning there, let me remind you where we're at.

Paul has been in Ephesus now for the whole chapter. He's encountered the disciples of John the Baptist and instructed them more fully about Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

- [4 : 28] He's encountered the sons of Siva who came to try to usurp the name of Jesus for spiritual power and found themselves running naked away from the encounter.
- And we see the church refined and humbled by this encounter. And they come and they burn their magic books and their traditions.
- And it leads us to our passage this morning. Acts chapter 19, verse 21.
- Let's read it and then we'll pray together. Now, after these events, Paul resolved in the spirit to pass through Macedonia and Achaia and to go to Jerusalem, saying, After I've been there, I must also see Rome.
- And having sent to 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.
- [5 : 27] For a man named Demetrius, the 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 a 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.
- And when they heard this, they were enraged. And were crying out, Great is Artemis of the Ephesians! So the city was filled with the confusion.
- And they rushed together into the theater, dragging with them Gaius and Aristarchus, Macedonians who were Paul's companions in travel. But when Paul wished to go in among the crowd, the disciples would not let him.
- [6 : 44] And even some of the Asiarchs, who were friends of his, sent to him and were urging him not to venture into the theater. Now some cried out one thing, some another, for the assembly was in confusion.
- Most of them did not know what they had come together, 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 defense to the crowd. But when they recognized 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 Ephesus 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, there are proconsuls.
- [7 : 58] Let them bring charges against one another. But if you seek anything further, it shall be settled in the regular assembly. For we are really in danger of being charged with rioting today, since there is no cause that we can give to justify this commotion.
- When he had said this, said these things, he dismissed the assembly. And after the uproar ceased, Paul sent for the disciples. After encouraging them, he said farewell and departed for Macedonia.
- Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for this word. Thank you for the account of your church and the advance of the gospel.

God, we pray you would open our hearts and our minds to understand and receive what you have to say to us today. We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, it's an interesting story, isn't it? And one of the most interesting things about it, if you look carefully, we've been reading the book of Acts for a long time. And who's been the major character since chapter 9?

[9 : 06] Paul. Paul. Paul's doing this, and Paul's doing that, and Paul's doing these things, and this is what we have. And suddenly, we have this account where Paul is almost completely sidelined.

Not only that, but the other person that we've seen over and over again, who is the major actor in the book of Acts as the church advances and as the gospel goes forward?

It's God, and God by His Holy Spirit. And did you notice? Not one mention. Not one mention of the Lord or of His Spirit.

So what are we to make of this account? What are we supposed to say? Well, I think that as we read this in its context and as we will explore it together, we will see that this passage for us is meant to encourage us to say that God will continue to make His gospel advance, even in the face of the most excessive gospel-provoked opposition.

Let's look at it together. The story unfolds really in two pieces. The first part is this gospel-provoked response, this overreaction as we'll look at it.

[10 : 21] And the second part in verses 35 through 39 is the intervention by which this provocation, this riot that happens, is calmed down. So first, the confused and excessive response.

Look with me in verse 23. Remember, as we begin this, the silversmith Demetrius gathers his tradesmen together and he says, men, we are in trouble.

Our trade is in trouble. Because this troublemaker, Paul, is preaching a gospel that says that the very things that we make do not have value.

That handmade gods are no gods at all. Now, why would he do this? Why would he bring this charge? Well, I think it's actually connected to what you saw at the very end of the last section that Nick preached on last week.

But I want you to look again with me. Verses 17 through 19. Fear fell upon the church in Ephesus and in the whole region. And many of those were now believers.

[11 : 29] And they confessed and divulged various practices of magic arts. And they burned their books. And the value of it was excessively high.

Do you remember Nick counted? It was like more than a lifetime's worth of wages in one single event of people coming together to unload these things.

They didn't even sell them to their neighbors who might have used them. They destroyed them in the fire. The gospel had been sown deeply.

Paul had been there for two and a half years. Reasoning. Teaching them. About Christ. And about this God who was a living God who did not live in temples made with human hands.

Paul's preaching had changed their hearts. And not only their hearts but their practices. It had gotten to the point where suddenly Demetrius and his cohorts were starting to feel the pinch.

[12 : 41] It reminds me of an account that I read of the Welsh revival in 1904. J. Wynor notes this. That after the revival drunkenness was immediately cut in half.

And many taverns went bankrupt. Crime was so diminished that judges were presented with white gloves. Signifying there were no cases of murder, assault, rape or robbery or the like to consider.

The police became unemployed in many districts. Stoppages occurred in the coal mines. Not due to unpleasantness between management or workers. But because so many foul-mouthed miners became converted.

And stopped using foul languages. That the horses that hauled the coal could no longer understand the workers. Oh friends.

Isn't it a sweet thing to hear of how the gospel can transform our hearts and our lives? Isn't it encouraging? This is what God is up to in the world.

[13 : 48] That the gospel is meant to have this transforming power. That out of the overflow of an individual heart being transferred from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of his son.

Lives are changed. Lives are changed. And destructive practices and evils that are socially recognized dry up in the lives of those who have been taken hold of by Christ.

Friend, this should be great encouragement that this is the gospel we have trusted in. That it will do these kinds of things. But it is also a challenge for us.

How deep is the gospel? How deep is the gospel gone in our hearts? How has it changed not just what we profess or where we go on Sunday mornings.

But the things that we trust in when things get hard. How does it change how we spend the resources not just of our money. But of our time.

[14 : 57] And of our love. How does it change how we date. How we pursue a career. How we love our parents. The gospel.

When it does its right work. It provokes a response. And this is what Demetrius sees. Demetrius sees that the gospel is making a huge inroad into his business.

When it talks about business. He's talking about profits. He's saying we are losing money because these people are becoming Christians. And we need to do something about it.

And the response. Starting in verse 28. Is huge. It is in fact excessive. When you read this.

It reminds you of mob psychology. If you've ever read about mob psychology. You've read descriptions of when mobs form.

[16 : 04] They become completely irrational. Look at the description of what happens. They become enraged. And they were crying out. Great is Artemis of the Ephesians. Great. That makes sense. They're reaffirming their cultural and religious identity.

We are built around the worship of Artemis. This rock fell from the sky. And that rock is now in our temple that we worship. This great goddess.

Who benefits us and brings us all these blessings. We've built this huge temple. Five times greater than the Parthenon. In Ephesus. To worship this goddess.

And so they're reaffirming their cultural, social and religious identity. Great is Artemis of the Ephesians. But then they go out.

The city was filled with confusion. They rush down what seemed to be the main street. Like rushing down Chapel Street. And crowds are pouring into the streets following them. They get to the theater.

[17 : 04] Which probably held 25 or 30,000 people. And look at verse 32. It's so funny.

It's a just. Some said this. Some said that. Lots of people didn't even know why they were there. But they were all crying. Great is Artemis of the Ephesians. The description is meant for us to see how excessive.

How irrational we get when our idols are threatened. When the depth of our identity seems to be at stake.

When who we are suddenly feels like we might lose it. It's slipping out of our fingers. Friends, I wonder if you recognize that in yourself at all.

I know I do. I can think back to a pretty ugly scene in my own ministerial life. A while ago, I was a leader of a team on a campus.

[18 : 19] We were having conflict among us about some of the direction we were meant to go. And I opened. I actually opened to 1 Corinthians.

Which we were just reading this morning in Sunday school class. And I was talking about what the nature of the true gospel ministry looks like. And being cross-shaped.

And I started to teach. And one of my staff team members interrupted me. And just said, well, I don't think that's right. As a matter of fact, I think you're just using this to justify yourself.

And regardless of the rightness or wrongness of her interruption. The idol of my authority, my identity as a pastor, as, well, as a campus worker at that point, felt very threatened.

And I responded in an extremely ugly manner. I at first attacked. And then I shut down.

[19 : 26] And then I left. It was not a pretty scene in my life. God has used it much to teach me and to humble me since then. But when our idols are threatened.

When the things that we think shape our identity. Give us significance. Suddenly you're at risk. We respond excessively.

And we see this in our culture too, don't we? We see this. We see this in this scene. We see it throughout church history. We see it today. How perilous it can be to identify with the way of Jesus.

Because Jesus will always come and subvert the dominant paradigm. Jesus will always come and overturn our cultural assumptions. Jesus wants to go deep and take hold of the very core of who we are.

And reshape it around Him. So that all these other things become at least secondary to a primary identity.

[20 : 38] To a primary significance of knowing Christ and being found in Him. Not having a righteousness of my own. But having one that is received by faith.

And maybe this is a time just to say, if you're here this morning, if you're exploring Christianity, and your gut reaction is, it is completely illogical.

It is, I cannot believe that reasonable people would ever consider this. Consider if that might not be an overreaction of your heart. Be careful if you find yourself with that kind of heart reaction to the gospel.

And I urge you to take time to be patient in exploring what the true gospel really is. This crisis, this story, tells us about how the gospel provokes this huge reaction in Ephesus.

Such that it's this mob that's out of control. Paul wants to go in. The disciples say, no, you can't do it. As in fact, even the Asiarchs, who are the civic leaders of the area, say, Paul, you don't want to go in there.

[21 : 57] It is out of control. Alexander, who is a Jew, was put forward probably trying to distinguish himself from the way of Paul and the gospel because even though the Jews were known to also be anti-idolatrous, they would never attack the way it, Paul has been accused of attacking or undermining the worship.

And so, he tries to stand up. And what does he get? He's shouted down for two hours. Two hours of, great is Artemis of Ephesus.

Two hours of a mob simply yelling. And you think, what a perilous place it must be. If you've ever read stories of pioneer missionaries, I can think of one.

Hudson Taylor goes into a new city, begins to establish a place for ministry. And the rumors in the city start to abound that they're kidnapping children and gouging their eyes out and eating their flesh.

Completely illogical, completely irrational responses. Mobs circle the compound. They ended up burning the place down only by God's miraculous intervention were the missionaries saved.

[23 : 18] And you know at times, God doesn't always save those in those circumstances. Sometimes, He doesn't even do that. And it brings us to the question, what are we then to do if following Jesus is this perilous?

If we are going to walk this road of provoking these excessive responses from our culture, from our world, what are we then to do?

How do we keep going? Well, at the height of the crisis, God intervenes. And He intervenes in a surprising way for the continued advance of the gospel.

Because suddenly, this fever pitch is gone. The town clerk shows up and He quiets them. And He works through this very savvy, very political speech.

Men of Ephesus, how can you think that our greatness could ever be threatened by this puny preacher and his little band of followers? We have a rock from heaven that we worship.

[24 : 40] We will never lose our glory. And these men, these men are not burning down our temples. They're not publicly going around decrying Artemis.

Which is a side note, is an interesting note. It's probable that Paul would preach in Ephesus as he did in Athens. Not decrying those other gods, but simply saying, no, there is a true and a living God who does not live in a temple made by human hands.

And then he goes on and he says, and look, if you have a problem, the courts are open. We have civilized ways of dealing with these things.

And the danger which Demetrius started out with saying, the danger is this way which is undermining our societal well-being.

The clerk says, no, no, no, friends. The danger is Rome. Because if Rome comes in and finds that we are out of control, then we will be under their thumb.

[26 : 00] It's not even a very good argument sometimes. Right? And yet it's persuasive. And as you read it in the context of the whole book of Acts, we must see this is the hand of God working through unexpected means in a surprising way.

God will continue the advance of the gospel. The gates of hell will not prevail against it. You might ask, why do you say that?

Well, if you've been paying attention carefully, you've noticed that I've left out the first two verses and the last verse that we read when we read this passage. Look with me back at verses 21 and 22.

Luke, as he's telling this story, begins by saying, now after these things, Paul resolved in his spirit to continue the advance of the gospel. That's my summary of it. He said, I'm going to go back through Macedonia and Achaia.

I'm going to do a collection that I'm collecting for the church in Jerusalem which is suffering. Then I'm going to go to Jerusalem and then I'm going to go to Rome and Rome, as we understand more broadly, is Paul's launching place to go to Spain.

[27 : 23] Paul's thinking the gospel advance is going to go forward. And I can't quite leave yet, so I'm sending my brothers ahead of me to do the collection and I'm going to stay in Asia.

And then Luke launches into this whole thing. And at the very end, with an unfortunate section break in the ESV, when the uproar ceased, Paul sent for the disciples.

He encouraged them. He said farewell and departed. With all this riot, with all this uproar, people might be thinking, oh no, what's going to happen? Are people going to stop going? Is the gospel advance going to be set back? Is suddenly this going to make people afraid? Is it going to squelch the fervor and the ongoing progress?

And Luke just says, no. No. God intervened. God intervened and the gospel advanced. So two applications for us.

[28 : 28] Firstly, friends, I want you to see that the nature of the gospel, the nature of the gospel is a gospel that is inherently subversive to every thought process of this world.

Every identity we build that is outside of God. Every significance that we find that is apart from God. Every meaning that we find in life that excludes God from it.

God is going to invade that with the gospel. And He's going to pierce and penetrate to the very core of our being. He's going to say, don't take a little metal shrine home to make you feel like you can connect with God.

Don't take that little thing to build your civic and social identity. because the God of this world has come to you.

And He has taken hold of your hearts. And you don't worship a God who lives in a temple made with hands, but you worship a God who has made your heart His temple.

[29 : 43] And He has come to live in you. And He's come to make you His. And He loves you. And He delights in you.

And in that, in that gospel then, we find our truest identity, our real meaning and significance. We find the depth of what we were made to be.

And so the gospel is always subversive and will provoke responses. But the second thing, the second thing about the gospel is that we have a God who intervenes for us in surprising ways.

We're about to go to the table, celebrate communion, Lord's Supper. friends, is there any other way that we could remember more clearly that this is the very nature of the God that we know?

A God who comes to intervene in our most dire circumstances when the riot of sin and the fallenness of the world seemed to be at complete mastery.

[31 : 04] God Himself took on human flesh and stepped into this world and He walked this world to show us His kingdom and His righteousness and then He stepped to the cross and identifying with us, He intervened.

He said, I will die the death they deserve. I will quell the rage of judgment against sin.

I will quell the riot of this broken world with my broken body. This is the God who intervenes for us and this is the God that we worship.

So, friends, if the cultural winds are blowing, if our parking lot ends up condos or who knows what, whatever our particular fears are today, we can trust in this God and we can dig deep into this gospel.

Let's pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. God, we do confess that, Lord, there are times when we do fear.

[32 : 44] We fear that we have come to the end and we will be overwhelmed that the responses of the culture to our Christian faith will defeat us and overcome us.

Lord, we fear that our own weaknesses will be our undoing. Lord, we fear that the gospel will not advance but in fact is encountering defeat after defeat.

Lord, in the midst of that, you come and speak words of hope and encouragement. Lord, that you will see your gospel advance. You will build your kingdom and that we can be of good cheer and have courage.

Lord, we pray for that this morning. And Lord, as we go to the table, Lord, will you remind us that this is the place where we stand at the foot of the cross. Lord, for here we have our surety.

Here we have our greatest confidence. Here we know that you are a God who will not abandon us, who will not leave us, but a God who will intervene for us to save us and to make us yours.

[34 : 02] We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Let me invite those who are going to serve to come up.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.