

Acts Series Part 54

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[0 : 00] Imagine you are sailing in the Mediterranean on a sun-kissed day. The skies are blue, the sea is calm, a light breeze tickles the sails and cools your skin. The year is 60 AD or thereabouts, and your vessel is sailing serenely into the port of Ephesus. Now, this is your first visit, and you are expectant. You have heard much of the grandeur and opulence of this principal city of the Roman province of Asia in what today we know as Turkey, or Ephesus is located in the country of Turkey today. What will stand out for you on this, your first visit? What will you see that will reveal to you what kind of city this is? Well, you disembark at the busy harbor and are immediately drawn by the thoroughfare that invites you into the city, the Arcadian Way.

It's a magnificent avenue of some 35 feet wide, marble paved and colonnaded, leading from the harbor in a straight line to the theater, the theater that was mentioned in the passage that we read in the book of Acts, where the population gathered to declare their loyalties to Artemis.

As you make your way along the Arcadian Way, and I invite you to try and imagine even visually this walk that you are taking, you observe immediately to your left the harbor baths and gymnasium, one of several gymnasiums in the city. There follows the athletics field. Then you glance to your right and before you is the Agora, or Marketplace, positively buzzing with deals being struck and money being made. Just across from the Agora, there is another commercial establishment. We might call it a pleasure palace. I think the technical term is brothel. You look ahead and there before you is the theater.

It's a magnificent structure capable of accommodating up to 25,000 of the good citizens of Ephesus.

You look to the left, you're in front of the theater, but you look to the left, your eyes are drawn to what you see in the distance, and there's a newly built stadium just a short distance away. To your right, a new avenue begins, Curatus Street, and this particular street makes its regal way to the temple of the divine Caesar and the goddess Roma. Well, you wander down this particular street, and as you do so, you feel observed. You feel observed not by the crowds. You're able to pass by the crowds without any particular reaction, but you feel observed by the statues that line this particular street. Statues dedicated to important citizens of the city. As you look around, you're also left amazed and awestruck by the opulent residences of the affluent citizens of Ephesus. You wonder, surely these can't be private homes, but on inquiry, you are assured that they are indeed private homes of some of the wealthier citizens of the city. Now, this is all a veritable feast for your eyes, but the most impressive sight is yet to come. On the outskirts of the city, a 15-minute walk away, stands in glorious isolation, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, the temple dedicated to the worship of Artemis, or also known as Diana, the largest building in the Greek world, four times the size of the size of the Parthenon. The goddess Artemis and her temple, you discover, are served by female cultic slaves, kept particularly busy during the wild orgies that would mark the festival of Artemis.

[4 : 53] Statues of this goddess depict her wearing a zodiac necklace, representing her authority over the stars, and indeed the course of history. And the same statutes, or statues, or some of them, she is represented as being supremely well-endowed. Not content with two, she glories in several mammaries of ample proportions. There's so much to take in, so many images to process.

But what can you conclude about this city from this brief tour or walk that you have undertaken? What kind of city is this? What are the passions and priorities of the good citizens of Ephesus? And you can come to a few, certainly tentative, possibly more than tentative conclusions. First of all, it is clear that this is a city that revolves around money and the making of it, preferably in copious quantities. In Ephesus, you are what you own. The bigger the house, the more money you have, the more important you are. Just to note in passing that the passage that we have just read in Acts

chapter 19 confirms this, this riot that takes place in Ephesus was not born out of religious fervor, but was driven, as was very clear, by financial concerns and interests.

So this city revolves around money and the making of it. This city also, you can reasonably conclude, is captivated by the body beautiful and sexual adventure. The gymnasiums and the brothels speak eloquently. But then even the goddess herself has the feel of a first-century porn queen.

This is a city obsessed with celebrities who are lauded and celebrated. The statues give clear evidence to that. Statues and indeed temples dedicated to the stars of Ephesus. This is a city also, you can conclude, that prides itself on its religious diversity and, yes, even tolerance.

[7 : 27] Artemis is certainly at the top of the pile, but happily coexists with many other gods and temples. It's a veritable multi-faith utopia. However, and this becomes very clear in the passage we've read and is very significant, tolerance ends where exclusive truth claims begin. The golden rule that must not be broken by any peddler of some new faith, the golden rule is that you must not question the truth of any of the myriad of other faiths. That you must not do, and for that there will be no tolerance.

Well, this was Ephesus some 2,000 years ago, and you probably know where this is leading us, or perhaps you do. The question is, does any of this sound familiar to us living in Scotland in the 21st century? Ephesus was an impressive city. It was also very clearly a pagan city, perhaps not so unlike our own cities here in Scotland, our own city of Aberdeen, a city that revolves around money and the making of it, a city captivated by the search for the body-beautiful and sexual adventure of diverse kinds, a city obsessed with celebrities, and a city that celebrates the rich diversity of its population of many faiths or none. Tolerance is king until you are so crass as to make any claim to absolute truth. Well, Ephesus, we are told in the passage we have read, was disturbed.

It was disturbed. We read there in verse 23, about that time there arose a great disturbance about the way. Ephesus was disturbed by the gospel of Jesus Christ. It was disturbed by men and women who had come to know Jesus as their Savior, sharing that good news with others in this city.

Disturbed by the good news that Jesus, the eternal Son of God, has died in the place of sinners and freely offers forgiveness and new life to all who put their trust in Him as their only and sufficient Savior. This news disturbed Ephesus.

Ephesus was disturbed by the gospel. How do you do that? How does the gospel disturb or impact a pagan city?

I, for one, would like to know, as we perhaps do very little disturbing in our own pagan city where God has placed us.

[10 : 38] As we explore the riot in Ephesus, I want to do two things. First of all, to describe the impact of the gospel, how it disturbs the city, and then, having done so, to draw lessons for us today. Indeed, even as we describe, we will necessarily be drawing some lessons, but I want to then, in a slightly more structured way, draw some specific lessons for us today. First of all, then, let's describe the impact of the gospel in Ephesus. Now, the passage we've read is quite an extensive one, and we will have to be necessarily selective in this. But I want to consider this matter of a description of the impact of the gospel of Jesus Christ under two headings, or to note two aspects of it. First of all, the success of the gospel, and then also the opposition to the gospel. Now, the two are evidently, even a cursory reading of the passage would draw us to this conclusion, the two are inextricably linked. The opposition follows the success. The opposition accompanies the success. Without success, there is likely to be little opposition. Even there, we might just pause for thought and ask ourselves why we perhaps know so little of this kind of opposition. We can do the calculation, I think. But here in Ephesus, there are these two aspects, the success of the gospel and the opposition that accompanies the success. And let's just notice these two aspects briefly. First of all, what can we say of the success of the gospel?

I want to spend a little more time on the opposition to the gospel. That is, after all, the emphasis of the passage. The passage is about this riot, this violent opposition to the gospel and to those who were proclaiming the gospel. And so, there we will pause for thought a little longer, but briefly to note the success of the gospel and limit ourselves to one, you might say, curious source for our information.

The source of our information is the one who we might describe as the principal opponent of the gospel in Ephesus, certainly the one who stirred up this riot. And I refer, of course, to Demetrius. Let's just remind ourselves about this man as he is described to us and indeed what he does from

verse 24.

A silversmith named Demetrius, who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought in no little business for the craftsmen. He called them together along with the workmen in related trades and said, and here he unwittingly, in a sense, describes for us the success of the gospel. Men, you know we receive a good income from this business. And you see and hear how this fellow Paul has convinced and led astray large numbers of people here in Ephesus and in practically the whole province of Asia. He says that man-made gods are no gods at all. And then he goes on, and we will in a moment consider what he goes on to say, but for our purposes at present, as we think of the success of the gospel, what he says there in verse 26 provides us quite significant evidence or information about the success of the gospel. How does Demetrius describe it? Well, first of all, he speaks of the large numbers, the large numbers who had come to faith in Jesus. He says that very explicitly, that Paul has convinced and led astray large numbers of people here in Ephesus. And so there is a numerical success.

[14 : 55] Many people, large numbers of people are hearing the message about Jesus, and as we were thinking a little earlier, they're saying yes. They're saying yes, large numbers, not just ones or two, Jews. We don't know what large numbers means, but from what we know of the church in Ephesus, from other sources of information, particularly and indeed within the canon of the New Testament, we know that it came to be a very large church. Perhaps hundreds, perhaps thousands of people were coming to faith in Jesus Christ. Demetrius tells us as much. So, concerning the success, we're told that there were large numbers who were being persuaded. But Demetrius tells us a little bit more. He tells us of the extent or the spread of the impact of the gospel. He speaks not only of large numbers in Ephesus, but he goes on and says, and in practically, the whole province of Asia.

Even in these few words, he's able to give us another important piece of information. The impact of the gospel was not restricted to the urban center, to Ephesus itself, but was spreading out towards the whole province. Now, although it's been a few weeks since we were considering Acts chapter 19, those of you with a keen memory will remember what we find in verse 10 of this chapter that we considered a few weeks ago, where we have described Paul's ministry in Ephesus.

And Demetrius is preaching, debating, expounding the gospel there in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. And in verse 10 of the chapter, we read, this went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord. And Demetrius really is confirming this. He's saying, that's true. That is what's happened. The whole of the province of Asia, maybe Demetrius is a little bit more, what shall we say, cautious in speaking about practically the whole province of Asia. So, this success was numerical. It was geographic, if you wish. It spread and extended beyond the city to the whole province. Demetrius also identifies, quite helpfully, the means whereby the presentation of the gospel was so successful. He describes to us, if you wish, the strategy of Paul, because he describes what Paul has done. He says, this fellow Paul, and the language is disparaging, you know, this fellow Paul. But then, what does he say? Has convinced. He then goes and says, led astray. But the first verb in particular is significant.

Demetrius is recognizing that the means that Paul has used isn't some personality cult, isn't by appealing to the baser instincts of the population, not offering them great rewards. It's not some convincing rant that he was able to present to the population. No, he has convinced them.

[18 : 06] He has persuaded them. He has presented to the good citizens of Ephesus who Jesus is, what he has done. He has presented to them coherent and cogent arguments concerning the content of the gospel, the truthfulness of it, their need for a Savior. And in all of these things, he has convinced them. He has persuaded them. Those who have heard, have considered, have thought about these things, and have come to conclusions. And many of them have been convinced. Many of them have been persuaded. Paul's was a careful and persuasive presentation of the truth. So, Demetrius gives us this snapshot, as it were, describing the success of the gospel in Ephesus. There's also another surprising feature that we don't learn from Demetrius, but the passage identifies in verse 31. And it's this aspect that the gospel that reached those who perhaps we wouldn't have expected to be reached.

Surprising converts, I suppose you might say. In verse 31, this comes out just in the flow of events. You know, the riot has begun. The people are baying for blood. Paul is willing to address them, but it's a foolish idea on his part. It's impetuous, but it's not wise. And he is quite rightly encouraged not to do so. And there we read in the context of that little passage within the passage of events. We

read in verse 31, even some of the officials of the province, friends of Paul, sent him a message begging him not to venture into the theater. So, officials of the province, men of high standing, perhaps some indeed with responsibilities related to the temple of Artemis. We don't know for sure. But surprising converts had also responded to the message. Now, in fairness, in verse 31, we're not told for sure if these men were converts. They're described as friends of Paul. It seems reasonable to suppose that some of them may well have indeed heard and believed the message. But even if they hadn't, this is also a reflection of the impact of the gospel, the success, if you wish, of the gospel in this pagan city. The gospel was, under God, spectacularly successful in Ephesus. It can happen in a pagan city. But with the success comes opposition. Now, as I've commented before, the whole passage really revolves around this opposition.

And I want to highlight some features of the opposition, features that we might expect to find in all opposition, or at least some of them, all opposition to the gospel. And that there would be these common features across centuries and across different locations and in different circumstances, that there would be common features to the opposition, oughtn't to surprise us, given that ultimately the opposition is masterminded by the same enemy. It is the devil himself who is the mastermind behind all opposition to the gospel. Well, let's notice some features of this opposition.

The first thing I would suggest is that it is unprincipled. We've read the passage. I think we have it in our minds, the events that took place. And the first feature I find or would want to mention is this, that it was unprincipled. Demetrius himself, if we focus our attention on Demetrius as, in a sense, representing, no doubt, many others. He was driven not by religious fervor, that we might at one level have considered worthy, foolish but worthy, had his motivation been religious fervor. We might say, well, it would be very foolish to defend this goddess Artemis. But I think at one level we could have said that there is something commendable about a religious fervor that is offended by another god being brought and competing with the god that you worship. But that is not the motivation behind the opposition of Demetrius. Rather, his concern is very clearly financial. His concern is that the success of the gospel is affecting his business. The bottom line for Demetrius is his bottom line. He's not making as much money anymore. He's not selling as many shrines anymore. He isn't making the copious amounts of money that he had been making. This is his problem. His problem is his bottom line. Demetrius wasn't bothered about what

Gaius or Aristarchus believed, the two men who were mentioned as having been seized by the crowds. He isn't interested in what religious persuasion they might have. He only becomes interested in what they believe. He only becomes bothered because he sees his own personal, in this case financial, interests affected.

[23 : 38] His opposition is pragmatic and unprincipled. I wonder if there are parallels that we can identify for ourselves.

In one respect, you might say there are very few parallels precisely because we do so little disturbing. And opposition, as we've said, is the product of success, of disturbing the city. And if we're not disturbing the city, well, there is very little reason to oppose us. However, in the measure that we are able to identify opposition to the gospel, and there are instances of it and increasing examples of it in our own day and in our own society, is it not often the case that they are, at heart, unprincipled, based on pragmatics and personal interest? I can give you just one example of somebody I was speaking to very recently. In fact, a colleague in the ministry who I spoke to at the assembly. And he was saying to me how he has for many, many years been able to go into the local primary school where he serves to go around the classes teaching RE. Well, just a few weeks ago, the head teacher, a new head teacher, called him into the office and said, as of today, you no longer are going to be able to come into this school to take RE classes. Now, as I inquired a little further as to the motivation behind this prohibition, I said, you know, was it the case that the teacher had some principal objection to what you were saying? He said, no, I don't think it was. I think that the issue was that she was afraid of what the inspector might say if he came round and found that such open access was given to the school.

You see, it wasn't any principle that she had. She was just looking after her own interests. Will this affect me if I do this or do the other? I should say that this story had a happy ending in that following discussion and dialogue, the doors remained open. But often the objection to or the opposition to the gospel will have this characteristic unprincipled, also very manipulative. Now, in the case of Demetrius, this is so evident.

The speech that he gives is a classic example of manipulating his audience. Listen, just as we read through it again and highlight some of the aspects of it, men, there in verse 25, men, you know we receive a good income from this business. Now, in fairness, he does begin quite honestly. He does begin by recognizing, look, there is a financial concern here that I have and that you share with me. But notice how he continues. And you see and hear how this fellow Paul is convinced and led astray, led astray, you know, he's a bad influence on our city, our neighborhood. Large numbers of people here in Ephesus and in practically the whole province of Asia, he says that man-made gods are no gods at all.

And then notice particularly what he goes on to say, there is danger not only that our trade will lose its good name. My concern isn't firstly with money, but the good name of our trade. We are honorable and respectable men. Our good names are being dragged through the mud by this fellow Paul.

[27 : 02] That can't be. And then he goes on to say, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be discredited. He's saying, what about our city, the reputation of our city? We're famous in the world for this wonderful temple. What will be of our reputation? What will people say of Ephesus if this man has his way? And then he goes on, not speaking only of the temple, but of the goddess herself. And the goddess herself, who is worshiped throughout the province of Asia and the world, will be robbed of her divine majesty. I don't think Demetrius was really that bothered about the divine majesty of Artemis. He was bothered about his profit margin. But notice how he manipulates his audience, and he brings in these issues that will touch people's, what shall we say, visceral responses, and generate the response that he wishes to generate. Cynically intending and succeeding in manipulating the masses. And again, I wonder, is that so different today in those who would oppose the gospel? Their tactics, manipulating information, spreading half truths in order to generate a response. Unprincipled, manipulative, evidently very hostile. In the case of Ephesus, it became violent or certainly very close to being violent. Gaius and Aristarchus being seized. That's an act of violence already. That it didn't go on further is thanks to God intervening through the city clerk.

But the hostility is palpable. This is an aggressive opposition to the gospel. Now again, as we think of ourselves, we can be thankful to God for the measure in which we are not subject to that degree of hostile opposition, certainly spared violent opposition. But in the language and in the tenor of those who do oppose the gospel, is there not so evidently a deeply held hostility to the gospel that becomes evident in the language that is used? What else can we say about this opposition? Well, another feature of it that is significant is that it was largely irrational. Again, the presentation we're given highlights that. Notice in verse 28, when they hear this speech, if we can call it that, on the part of Demetrius, they were furious and began shouting, Great is Artemis of the Ephesians! And further on in the passage, we're told that they went on singing or chanting these words for two hours. There is a delicious irony in the fact that all they achieved was to get very, very hoarse. At the end of the day, that was all they achieved. You see, this is irrational. They're shouting, they're screaming, they're chanting, they're not thinking about what they're doing, they're not considering the arguments, they're not pausing to consider whether what they're being asked to do is reasonable or in any way grounded in reality. It's irrational. We also have the, I think, what is intended to be almost a humorous description of the crowd in verse 32. You can quibble whether the intention is for it to be humorous. There's certainly a sarcasm, I think, an irony in it. Notice what we read there in verse 32, the assembly was in confusion. Some were shouting one thing, some another, and then particularly this next sentence, most of the people did not even know why they were there. They didn't even know why they were there. They'd been drawn with the crowd. They were going with the flow. They were shouting what everybody else was shouting. They were believing what everybody else was believing.

It was irrational. You know, that is so similar to the situation we have today. We have the new atheists. We have the sars of political correctness. We have the gurus of gender politics. And those who mindlessly buy into their propaganda and their lies. And those who do it knowingly and those who simply do it in parrot fashion, repeating what they've heard, employing arguments that are often irrational and confused. Now, I think that ought not to discourage us. But rather, we should take heart that those who oppose us, the arguments they use are indeed so irrational. We ought not to be intimidated by such opponents. There is a very real danger in many fields of human endeavor to be intimidated by our opponents. If I can illustrate that with a rather superficial example.

The Peruvian football team has great difficulty whenever it has to play Brazil or Argentina. And it has nothing to do with the relative skills of the two teams, though that might be an issue. The key issue is that there is this inferiority complex. The players go on to the pitch and they say, oh, it's Brazil. It's Argentina. There's no way we can win this game. And so even before the ball is kicked, they've really given up. It's psychological, if you wish. It's an inferiority complex that seems to envelop them. And I wonder if we are not also in danger of something similar. Oh, the opponents of the gospel, they're so clever. They have so many PhDs. They write so many wonderful books and sell millions of copies and they have access to the media and they have such slick communicators.

[32 : 59] And we feel intimidated. But let's get behind all the razzmatazz and recognize that the arguments they use are largely irrational, confused. One says one thing, another says another. Most of them don't even know why they're there at all. So let's not be intimidated by them. What we have is the truth.

What they have are lies. We are on the winning side, not them. All that will happen to them is that they'll get hoarse hour after hour, book after book, interview after interview, and they'll just get very tired and very hoarse. And they will not for one moment frustrate the purposes of our king. The opposition, unprincipled, manipulative, hostile, irrational, and as I've been suggesting, ultimately fruitless. Did the opposition frustrate the cause of the gospel in no significant way? On the contrary, God was clearly ordering events and touching hearts and minds to protect His people. We've already commented on the friends that He had who wisely advised Him not to address the mob, but very particularly we have the participation of the town clerk, whose involvement is described for us from verse 35 and following. Now the town clerk says some very foolish things, but at heart what he's doing is appealing to the crowd, and his motivations were not to protect Gaius and Aristarchus and Paul. That was not what was driving him. His concern was the city itself and the manner in which the Roman authorities would look very dimly on a riot like the one that was developing. Nonetheless, though his arguments, some of them, are very questionable, though his motivation wasn't particularly noble, nonetheless what he does is appeal to the crowd that they must respect due process and the rule of law. And in so doing, he did afford protection to the Christians. This is a theme that we find repeated in the book of Acts, how due process and the rule of law is served to protect the Christians, far from being something that should be seen as something that would mitigate against them. Now, we know that the rule of law can be corrupted in such a way and abused in such a way that Christians can be affected, but on this occasion, it is this appeal to the rule of law that provides for the Christians protection from the mob. So, the opposition of Demetrius and those he managed to stir up was ultimately fruitless. A number then of features of this opposition, but now we move on and briefly draw things together in terms of identifying lessons. Some of them I think we have drawn out already in the passing. But I do want to mention three lessons, short and sharp, or hopefully just short, three lessons that we can draw from this for ourselves. And the first one is this, and I express them in terms of a challenge. First of all, be bold. We must not be intimidated by the pagan city. The gospel is designed for pagan cities. It has the power to topple idols with feet of clay. It has proved its power in Ephesus and countless other cities and in every generation. Be bold. Be inspired by Paul. Listen to him as he plans so matter-of-factly his conquest of the known world. We began our reading in chapter 19 and in verse 21,

[36 : 46] Paul is simply describing, or we have described for us, Paul's travel plans. Decided to go to Jerusalem, passing through Macedonia and Achaia. After I had been there, he said, I must visit Rome also. We know from other sources that his intention was then to proceed on to Spain, the westernmost tip of the Roman Empire. Big plans to quote one commentator. No Alexander, no Caesar, no other hero approaches to the large-mindedness of this little Benjamite in reference to Paul. This boldness that characterized the apostle, as we have already noted on previous occasions, involves boldness in vision, but also boldness in ministry or in delivery of the message that he had been given. So, the first lesson, be bold.

Let us be bold. But the second one, be wise. To be bold is not the same as to be brash and foolish in delivering the message. Wisdom demands careful planning, the planning that we can identify in Paul's movements, but also, and this is the one thing I would just draw out and highlight for you, in the prudent execution of delivering the message. Knowing when to be silent, in the case of Paul, not addressing this mob that had risen up, but also knowing how to present the truth.

We return to the town clerk for one moment. He says something very interesting and I think very revealing. In verse 37, as he is addressing the crowds, notice what he says, you have brought these men here, though they have neither robbed temples nor blasphemed our goddess. Now, I have no reason to doubt that he is stating something that was true. You could argue, well, maybe he's just trying to calm them down and so he says that, but it seems to me reasonable that what he's saying is true.

That these men, Gaius, Aristarchus, Paul, the Christians, were not guilty of these things. Well, robbing temples, fair enough, we wouldn't expect them to rob temples, but neither were they guilty, according to the town clerk, of blaspheming our goddess. What does that suggest? Well, it suggests to me that the manner in which Paul presents his message in Ephesus isn't to come in and say, you pagan idolaters, see that goddess Artemis, she is just nothing. You know, she can't do anything.

You're just so crazy to bow down before this goddess. That wasn't his manner. That was true, of course. He doesn't dilute the message. Demetrius himself says that central to his message is that gods made by hands of men are no gods at all. But the manner he presents it is by presenting the truth, presenting the superiority of Jesus Christ, presenting Jesus Christ as the King of Kings, as the living and true God. And then people can draw their conclusions about the likes of Artemis.

[39 : 42] It seems to me that there is a hint here, certainly, in the words of the town clerk as to the wisdom in Paul's presentation of the gospel. He doesn't dilute it. He doesn't modify it, but he presents it in a prudent and in a wise way. His message is a positive message. The implications of it for idol worship are very clear, and Paul would not be as slow to recognize that. But the manner he presents it, it would seem, be bold. And then finally, and with this I close, be encouraged. We can have an impact in our pagan city, a city that revolves around money and the making of it, a city obsessed with sex and with pleasure, a city that glories in celebrities, a city that glories in everybody being right, in everybody having their own way to heaven, and that's fine. We can have an impact in such a city. And so let us pray and let us work towards the day when in Aberdeen there is a great disturbance about the way. Let us pray.