

Persecuted Gospel Ministry

Acts 19:21-41

People all throughout history have wanted religion to be nothing but soft, nice and positive. This attitude wants a salvation that is all flowers, rainbows and bunnies. Who doesn't want flowers, rainbows and fuzzy bunnies? Who doesn't want an Easter basket full of chocolate rabbits, brightly colored eggs, and marshmallow chicks, nestled in clean fake grass? No controversy, no negativity, no disagreeability; just a basket of sweets.

Now Christians like flowers, rainbows and bunnies, too. We love flowers – but flowers remind us of a paradise lost, and the weeds and thorns of sin, and the loss of the tree of life. We love the rainbow – these are all God's colors and not the sinner's colors, the colors of the homosexuality. The rainbow is still a sign that there is wrath against our race, and that the good things we enjoy in this world come from common grace – from a restraining hand of an Almighty God who governs all his creatures. We love bunnies, softer than clouds. How Christians are to be like them: soft, gentle, harmless; and also ready to flee with all speed when the fox has found our scent and trail; not given to fighting but willing to do so in a gracious way when necessary. To borrow the words of the warrior David, "God's gentleness has made me great."

We find ourselves in Ephesus one last time with what is no doubt controversial, negative, and disagreeable. We began with how the Gospel Ministry was prolific as Paul was serving fully and freely in

that great city – the religious center of the ancient world. We have seen how powerful that ministry was as the various sorcerers were convinced and overthrown by the Word and Spirit.

Today we come to the Gospel Ministry Persecuted; that the Gospel is not received by all.

On the surface, we can learn from this what side we should be on. The 1986 Nobel Peace Prize winner, Elie Wiesel, Jewish survivor of the Holocaust, said: “Take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormenter, never the tormented.” But this is not just about taking sides – it is about taking sides with the Gospel, and with the Lord Jesus Christ, and to take up the cross and stand with Him and His Cause.

Three points arise from these 21 verses, each having an equal share of 7 verses: first, the reaction; second, the riot, and third, the resolution.

First of all, we are brought to a contrast between Paul and Demetrius. Paul in his spirit (or in the Spirit), is wrestling with short term immediate plans and long term ultimate plans. More on that in a moment.

But what a different spirit is in this Demetrius! It is one thing to sin against God privately, another to do so openly against the One who sees even our secret sins! It is one thing to sin, and another to sin so heinously as to embrace such a grotesque god as Diana – who is so bizarre and freakish as to forbid repeating her description before children! It is one thing to sin so wickedly, and yet another to plead

for such evil and defend and protect it; to plead for it as well as practice it. It is one thing to support such a public sin, and quite another to be supported by it; to benefit from it – to prosper and gain from it. And it one thing to make merchandise of sin, to make a business of it; it is worst still to persecute those who resist that evil, to gather others to you and attack the opposition who are seeking to overcome evil with good; or, as in our day, to persecute those who do not celebrate your sin with you.

How opposite is Paul, who is all about “the Way”, the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul was a man who was saved by the Way, through this living and mighty Savior, Jesus. And so he sought to make all others like him – as he said later to the king in Acts.

This is the right attitude – wanting others to be like ourselves, know Christ and His redemption. Why is this such an earnest concern for us? The theologian David Murray has laid out for us a short but powerful top ten reasons why all should become Christians.

1. Christ gives us truth in a world full of lies
2. Christ gives us hope in a world full of despair.
3. Christ gives us love in a world full of hate.
4. Christ gives us life in a world full of death.
5. Christ gives us forgiveness in a world full of vengeance.
6. Christ gives us power in world full of weakness – moral, spiritual weakness.
7. Christ gives us certainty in a world full of confusion.
8. Christ gives us purpose in a world full of futility.

9. Christ gives us beauty for ugliness (holiness, conformed wonderfully to Jesus).
10. Christ gives us peace in a world full of war.

This brings us then from the reaction to the second point: The riot itself

See first of all the way of the flesh. See how it begins in the heart – filled with rage – the same words used by Luke in his gospel of those in the synagogue, who sought to throw Jesus off of a cliff! Their charge is that the gospel of Paul had stolen everything from them – their money and livelihood is first, but this is not all. They thought it stole their honor and place in culture, in society; it stole their position.

This all spreads by word of mouth – see the power of the tongue. Here they are brought to the theater – a place which is believed to hold 25,000 people – the place of civic festivals and assemblies three times a month. Here the scape goats are found and put on display – both Gaius and Aristarchus – companions of Paul.

The picture is one of chaos mixed with purpose – confusion acting as one man. Of proceeding from being divided to united. The Jews see their opportunity to get their man Alexander in there, and distance themselves from the Christians.

Notice again the contrast – for this is not the warfare of the Spirit but of the flesh. Paul is clearly a man of like passions as we are. He immediately would dive in and speak a word in defense. But his friends as well as some higher persons persuade him otherwise.

Nevertheless, he is not a man without affection, without emotion, without a heart – but his heart is purified, zealous for truth, and as well, easily entreated by the wisdom of others.

But not the mob who are found shouting the same mindless chant for two hours! Here is the strength of idolatry at work.

One writer says: “There was no other metropolis in the Empire whose ‘body, soul and spirit’ could so belong to a particular deity as did Ephesus to her patron goddess Artemis.” Her name and image was stamped on their money – as though it read, in Artemis we trust! For them, “[Artemis] dwelt neither in the vast temple nor in the tiny terra-cotta; she was implicit in the life of nature; she was the reproductive power that kept the world ever the same amid the constant flux of things. Mother of all and nurse of all, she was most really present wherever the unrestrained life of nature was most freely manifested, in the woods, on the mountains, among the wild beasts. Her worshippers expressed their devotion and their belief in her omnipresence...” Sir William Ramsey

So is this the right way? Should Christians stand up for their God Jesus in the same fashion? Rioting, picketing, unruly demonstration, majority rule? If that is the way, then why did Jesus, who is the Way, not do the same? Instead He said: “Let this mind be in you...” “Overcome evil with good;” Not fighting fire with fire, love and soft answer conquers all and breaks bones.

Let us move forward then to the third point in the last 7 verses: **The RESOLUTION:** which comes from the **Town Clerk.**

What does he say? How does he argue?

1. 1st, you are protesting what is undeniable! He insists that Artemis is no man-made god, but fell directly from the skies, from Zeus himself. We have evidence that meteorites were often worshipped in ancient days. But the Bible's posture is clear: as worshipped, they are so with and by men's hands. This agrees with the crowds, and wins them over to listen.

2. 2nd, you are attacking innocent men – men who are clearly not guilty of temple robbery or sacrilege. Again, there was some liberty to disagree acknowledged here.

3. 3rd, you are bringing charges of crimes, but not to rightful authorities! Nothing can be done properly here. He puts off the question to its proper court; it was the proper place, but not the proper time.

4. 4th, you and I are chargeable! Why are you bringing us into danger of accusation and forceful reaction from Rome?

So see here how the calm **sanity** of the clerk is admirable. Should we not be thankful for unbelievers who see the problems accurately of being a people ruled by force rather than by principle? Who of us wants chaos?

Then consider the town clerk's **suggestion** – which really is the battle of the ages. Should the gospel ever be hauled before the throne of men and be judged? The silversmiths thought so; that the approval of the

church is to be sought from the hands of men. And for the next 250 years, this battle would rage. Even then, the very one on the throne of Rome would soon begin his war on the people of God. Should the church be recognized by the state?

Then consider the clerk's **simplicity** regarding the gospel: they saw it really as no big deal; why get all worked about it. Yet, this was a power that they did not understand, which changed the very face of the world. 150 years later, Tertullian would say: "We are but of yesterday, and yet we have filled all the places that belong to you — cities, islands, forts, towns, exchanges; the military camps themselves, tribes, town councils, the palace, the senate, the market-place; we have left you nothing but your temples."

Lastly, see the clerk's **solution**, which is a good and a bad one. It was good in that of being under law, but what law? And it was bad, in that it would bring Christians before men who were incompetent of rendering judgment upon spiritual matters.

There must be a separation between the church and the state. And that brings us this last point – the great aim of the believer, who himself has been freed from the clutches of sin, is LIBERTY! Spiritual liberty which Christ gives, brings proper liberties in every sector of life. The gospel is not satisfied with only changing our hearts, but not changing our homes and our lives. Liberty of conscience means we must be men who are free under law, free in our lawful pursuits, free in our loving one another in a holy fashion.

Idolatry is enslaving, and animal-like, making us foolish, dumb, short-sighted, and empty. This is what the Gospel of Jesus Christ has done,

to rescue us from ourselves, and to bring us into the glorious liberty of the sons of God. And those who are enslaved will not like this.