**The Riot in Ephesus**

(Acts 19:23-34)

By Pastor Ricky Kurth

One day a police chief asked one of his officers, “Do you have any suspects as to who might have started the riot in the city last night?” The officer answered, “No, but I’d like to question a lady wearing high heels and a pink dress.” The chief replied, “Okay, but I think you should question her wearing your uniform instead.”

Speaking of city riots, here in Acts 19 we’re about to read about a riot that broke out in the ancient city of Ephesus over something that the Apostle Paul had been preaching. The story begins in Acts 19:23, where we read,

**“And the same time there arose no small stir about that way.”**

Now to begin with, when Luke tells us that there was “no small stir” in Ephesus that day, that’s his way of telling us that there was *a great big stir* about that way. And in our last lesson, we saw that “that way” was what the followers of the Lord Jesus were called, ever since He said,

***“I am the way,* the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, *but by Me”* (John 14:6).**

The world wants you to think that it doesn’t matter what you believe, because all religions lead to heaven. Don’t you believe it! The Lord didn’t say He was *one* of the ways to the Father. He said He was *the* way to the Father. And then He added that no one *gets* to the Father *without* Him.

But that’s not what the guy in the next verse of our text believed, as we see in verse 24, where we *also* learn *the reason* for the big stir:

**“For a certain man named Demetrius, a silversmith, which made silver shrines for Diana, brought no small gain unto the craftsmen” (Acts 19:24).**

Obviously, this guy believed in a false goddess named Diana. Diana was one of the gods of ancient Greek mythology that you learned about in school, but probably forgot about if you’re anything like me. She was extremely popular in Ephesus, so they built her a temple that was so utterly magnificent, it was one of the famed seven wonders of the world. That means it ranked right up there with the Great Pyramid of Giza, which was the tallest man-made structure in the world for 4,000 years. Diana’s temple was three stories tall, bigger than a football field, and made entirely of *marble.* There was simply nothing like it in the ancient world.

And when verse 24 says that Demetrius and the craftsmen made silver “shrines” for Diana, a shrine is a building in which you put something that you worship or revere. Every year in Canton, Ohio, the National Football League has what they call Enshrinement Week, a week in which they *enshrine* statues or busts of their most revered players in a building called The Pro Football Hall of Fame. I’ve never been to it, but you can see the building from the highway. When I drove past it years ago, they had what looked like a three story tall banner hanging on the outside of the building that featured the greatest running back of all time. All Chicagoans know that that was Walter Payton. If Walter had had a better offensive line, he would have set records that *nobody* would ever have been able to break. Walter has always been revered in the Chicago area where I live.

But the Greeks worshipped and revered Diana, so her temple was a building that had a statue of Diana enshrined in it. And when verse 24 says that Demetrius made *silver* shrines for Diana, it means he made little silver *replicas* of her temple to sell to people who worshipped her—people who then took those silver shrines home and worshipped *them* as *idols.*

And Demetrius wasn’t the *only* silversmith in town who made those shrines. Verse 24 says that those shrines brought no small gain to *other* craftsmen as well. But Demetrius must have been what we would call *the front man* of those craftsmen, because verse 24 says that *he* was the one who brought no small gain *to them.* So he must have been the silversmith who *promoted* their shrines, and made them popular throughout Asia and the known world. So it’s not surprising that, as their leader, he’s the one who called the silversmiths together for a union meeting in verse 25, where we read of those craftsmen,

**“Whom he called together with the workmen of like occupation, and said, Sirs, ye know that by this craft we have our wealth” (Acts 19:25).**

Those silversmiths had gotten *filthy rich* by making those idols. And when it says Demetrius called together workmen “of like occupation,” that means that silversmiths like himself weren’t the *only* ones getting wealthy off of Diana. We read about *another* kind of smith in II Timothy 4:14, where Paul told Timothy,

**“Alexander *the coppersmith* did me much evil: the Lord reward him according to his works” (II Timothy 4:14).**

Paul seems to be talking to Timothy about Alexander as someone he knew, which would lead us to believe that Alexander lived in Ephesus, for Timothy lived in Ephesus as well (ITim.1:3). That means he was probably one of the ones of like occupation in attendance at this union meeting. We know that silversmithing and coppersmithing were related crafts, for Paul Revere was a silversmith who later did some coppersmithing. And I don’t mean the Paul Revere who was the head of the rock band Paul Revere and the Raiders. Remember him? He thought they were America’s answer to the British invasion of bands like the Beatles and the Rolling Stones. If the British were coming, Paul Revere was there to *warn* everyone that the British were coming. That was his schtick!

But all of this means that if a visitor in Ephesus couldn’t afford a *silver* replica of Diana’s temple, he could opt for one made of copper. But all of that profit was about to go out the window if they didn’t do something about this Paul character!

And this was a turning point in the Book of Acts. Up until now, it was always unsaved *Jews* who opposed Paul’s ministry for threatening their *religion.* Now unsaved Gentiles were *joining* those Jews for threatening their *wealth.* That means now *the whole world* was united against God’s apostle, and the message of grace he proclaimed.

Well, Demetrius went on to tell those smiths,

“Moreover ye see and hear, that not alone at Ephesus, but almost throughout all Asia, this Paul hath persuaded and turned away much people, saying that they be no gods, which are made with hands:

**“So that not only this our craft is in danger to be set at nought; but also that the temple of the great goddess Diana should be despised, and her magnificence should be destroyed, whom all Asia and the world worshippeth” (Acts 19:26,27).**

Now here we see *another* industry that was going to suffer if Paul wasn’t silenced. Demetrius’ reference to Diana’s *temple* shows that he worried Paul’s ministry would cause Diana’s shrine to be despised, and if that happened, it would have a *serious* impact on *tourism* in Ephesus. You know, in our day and age millions of people make religious pilgrimages to places like Jerusalem, the Vatican, and Mecca every year. Three to five million people a year visit the *Mormon* temple in Salt Lake City. And those pilgrimages generate a whole lot of money in tourism.

And a lot of those tourism dollars in *Ephesus* went to buying those little shrines for Diana—a flow of dollars that was about to come to an abrupt end if Diana’s temple was despised, and her magnificence destroyed.

But at this point in Demetrius’ address, I think he realizes he’s been sounding *way* too mercenary and money-grubbing. I mean, up until now all he’s been saying is how Paul was hurting their income. So here in verse 27 he added, as it were, “And oh yeah, Paul’s getting people to disrespect *our god* too!” This shows where his priorities were, doesn’t it? After saying that, he was probably thinking, “I probably should have said that first. I probably should have led with that.”

This passage always makes me think of a line from the book *Gone With the Wind.* I’m not sure if the movie has the line, but when Rhett Butler asked Scarlett O’Hara to be his mistress, without thinking she replied, “What would I get out of that except a passel of brats!”—a bunch of illegitimate kids! And as soon as she said that, the book tells us what she was thinking, and how she immediately realized that she *should* have said, “How dare you suggest such a thing to a lady like me!” Instead, she showed she was more concerned about have having to raise a bunch of illegitimate children than she was about her honor as a southern lady. And Demetrius showed he was more worried about his *wallet* than he was about his *god!*

Well, Demetrius hasn’t said very much, but he’s said enough to get the riot started!

**“And when they heard these sayings, they were full of wrath, and cried out, saying, Great is Diana of the Ephesians.**

**“And the whole city was filled with confusion: and having caught Gaius and Aristarchus, men of Macedonia, Paul's companions in travel, they rushed with one accord into the theatre” (Acts 19:28,29).**

There must have been an awful lot of craftsmen who shouted that shout, because Luke tells us that *the whole city* heard them. So they knew something was up. They just didn’t know what! And when the smiths couldn’t find Paul, they grabbed two of his known associates and rushed into the theater.

That theater is still in existence today, and online pictures show that it was a pretty impressive place. Like most outdoor theaters, it was carved into a hillside to make use of the grade of the hill’s slope. This may explain why the theater is still standing long after Diana’s temple crumbled, for it was supported by the hillside.

But unlike any *other* outdoor theater *on the planet,* this theater had a seating capacity of *25,000 people.* Compare that to the largest *active* outdoor theater in the world *today,* the Hollywood Bowl in Los Angeles, a venue that can only accommodate 170,000. I recently saw an old episode of The Beverly Hillbillies in which some swindler tried to *sell* the Hollywood Bowl to Uncle Jed. So when I picture *that* outdoor theater, I picture Jed, Granny, Jethro and Ellie May standing on the stage!

But with a seating capacity of 25,000, this theater in Ephesus was one *massive* theater. And you wouldn’t think that 25,000 people could “rush” into the theater, as it says in verse 29. But pictures of the theater *also* feature an extremely broad avenue leading right up to the theater. It’s called The Harbor Road because it used to reach all the way to the harbor, before the water level receded and went way down due to global cooling over the centuries. But don’t worry, I hear the water levels are rising again!

But they say that this road was *36 feet across,* or about the width of a three-lane superhighway—although the pictures I’ve seen make it look much broader than even that. But to get to the point, if music fans can get in and out of the Hollywood Bowl for a concert *in one evening* using modern roads, I’m thinking that 25,000 people would have no problem rushing into *this* theater. Especially when you consider they don’t have to deal with parking their cars!

And we know Paul must have followed his coworkers into the theater, for in verse 30 we find him waiting in the wings:

**“And when Paul would have entered in unto the people, the disciples suffered him not” (Acts 19:30).**

Paul knew that that crowd was out for *blood,* and he wanted to make sure that it was *his* blood that was shed, and *not* the blood of his coworkers. But his *other* brethren talked him out of it.

This reminds me of what happened when David wanted to put *his* life in jeopardy, and it says in II Samuel 18:3:

**“...the people answered...they will not care for us; neither if half of us die, will they care for us: but now *thou art worth ten thousand of us:* therefore now it is better that thou succour us out of the city.”**

Later, David’s men told him,

**“Thou shalt go no more out with us to battle, *that thou quench not the light of Israel”* (II Samuel 21:17).**

And as I’m sure you can imagine, *Paul* was the spiritual light that God didn’t want to see quenched in Ephesus that day.

And Paul’s disciples weren’t the *only* ones who kept him from entering the arena. Verse 31 says,

**“And certain of the chief of Asia, which were his friends, sent unto him, desiring him that he would not adventure himself into the theatre” (Acts 19:31).**

Here we see that Paul had friends in high places in Asia. That word “chief” there refers to prominent citizens in Asia who we would probably call movers and shakers in society. Now it doesn’t say that those people were *disciples,* so we have to assume they weren’t saved. That begs the question of how they came to *be* Paul’s friends. And I’m sure that part of the answer to that question is that Paul was probably as likeable and loveable as me! But I think there might have been more to it than that.

You see, back in the days when Billy Sunday crusades were as famous as Billy Graham crusades were later, the bosses of big companies—the *Chief* Operating Officers of those large companies—used to contact the CEO’s of their plants in *other* cities and say: “When Bill Sunday comes to town, get behind him and help him with his expenses. Finance anything he needs, because when he was here in *our* town, our employees stopped showing up for work drunk or hung over, and they stopped stealing stuff from the plant because they got religion!” We know they got saved, of course.

But I think that *that’s* how these chief people of Asia got to be Paul’s friends. They may not have believed what Paul was preaching, but they knew he was good for business.

So once again you see evidence that if you want to make the world a better place, don’t go into politics, go into *the ministry.* Do what Paul and Billy Sunday did and *preach the gospel.* That’s your only hope of making the world a better place, and you don’t have to become a minister to do it.

Well, after the whole city rushed into the theater, we read,

**“Some therefore cried one thing, and some another: for the assembly was confused: and the more part knew not wherefore they were come together” (Acts 19:32).**

When I was a young pastor, I used to joke that this sounds like a description of some Pentecostal meetings. But I don’t say that any more, now that I’m an older, kinder and gentler pastor.

But here we have to ask: If most of them didn’t know why they were there, then why did they bother to come? Well, if I had to guess, I’d say it was because the angry voices of all those craftsmen told them that somebody was about to get *fed to the lions,* or killed in some other way, and they didn’t want to miss the show! Archeologists have found evidence that gladiators fought in Ephesus, so maybe here they thought that it was time for another bloody show featuring man’s inhumanity to man. I don’t know if they have proof that people were killed in the arena, but history says that Timothy was later beaten to death by a mob of angry Ephesians when he tried to preach the gospel to a parade honoring Diana, so we know that the citizens of Ephesus were capable of taking human life.

But then something *odd* happened in the next verse of our text:

**“And they drew Alexander out of the multitude, the Jews putting him forward. And Alexander beckoned with the hand, and would have made his defence unto the people” (Acts 19:33).**

Now who’s this Alexander guy, and why are the Jews shoving him into the arena where it seems Gaius and Aristarchus are about to be slaughtered? Well, the name Alexander was a pretty popular name in the centuries after Alexander the Great conquered the world, so we don’t know for certain if this was the *coppersmith* named Alexander that we saw earlier. But I think it was, and I think he was a Jew, for a couple of reasons.

First, you’ll notice that it was the Jews who put him forward, which would suggest that he was standing in their midst. But second, you’ll notice that when he wanted to get their attention he “beckoned with the hand.” That was the Jewish way of getting people’s attention when they wanted to give a speech, before the days of PA systems. Nowadays you just tap on the mike to get the attention of a crowd of people. But look what Paul did in Acts 13:16:

**“Paul stood up, *and beckoning with his hand said,* Men of Israel, and ye that fear God, *give audience.”***

We see it again in Acts 21:40, where

**“Paul stood on the stairs, *and beckoned with the hand unto the people.* And when there was made a great silence, *he spake unto them...”***

So now the question is, why would the Jews thrust one of their own into the midst of such a dangerous situation? And I think the reason is: when the crowd wanted to kill Paul for saing there’s no such thing as gods made with hands, and then when they couldn’t *find* Paul and grabbed a couple of *other* guys who said there’s no such thing as gods that are made with hands, it wasn’t going to take that angry mob very long to remember that *the Jews* didn’t believe in gods made with hands, and start tossing *them* into the arena to be killed.

So they decided to appoint a representative to explain to that bloodthirsty mob that *Ephesians* Jews didn’t *mind* idolatry. So I picture them saying, “Whoever wants to go out there, take one step forward,” and then they all took one step *backward,* and there stood poor Alex! At least that’s how I picture what went down that day.

You say, “But how would he be able to *prove* that they didn’t mind idolatry?” If that’s what you’re thinking, the only way I can think of is that he would have informed the crowd that Ephesians Jews *were in on their idol-making!* I believe the only way he could have settled them down was to convince them that Ephesians Jews were card-carrying members of their shrine-making union.

If that seems unrealistic to you, remember that the Lord once encountered a group of Jews in Matthew 8:28-34 who raised swine, and that was against the law of Moses as well.

Stop and think it through for a moment. If this Jew was named after a famous Gentile conqueror like Alexander, that tells you that his parents were not exactly the most spiritually-minded Jews to be found. And if their lack of spirituality was any indication of the religious caliber of the *rest* of the Jews in Ephesus, that means that Jews in those days were a lot like many *Christians* today—they weren’t above doing something displeasing to God if there was money to be made in it.

And if this Alexander is the coppersmith, that’d explain why he did Paul “much evil,” as we saw earlier. I mean, Paul nearly got him *killed!* That mob didn’t even let him *give* the defense he beckoned with his hand to give them, as we see in verse 34:

**“But when they knew that he was a Jew, all with one voice about the space of two hours cried out, Great is Diana of the Ephesians.”**

Now I want you think about what you’re reading here, because—have you ever seen news coverage of a public protest, the kind where they chant things like, “What do we want? *Justice!* When do we want it? *Now!”* Or, “What do we want? *Time travel.* When do we want it? *It doesn’t matter!”*

No matter what they’re protesting, when you see it on the news, it looks like they never stop chanting that same old refrain, all the live-long day. But the truth is, they *often* stop chanting—*especially* when the television cameras stop rolling and the camera crews leave the scene. That’s because nobody can sustain a chant like that all day long, not even for two hours!

So how did these bozos pull it off? Well, look what Paul said about this experience in his epistle to the Corinthians:

**“...after the manner of men *I have fought with beasts at Ephesus...”* (ICorinthians 15:32).**

Now as we’ve seen, Paul didn’t *really* fight with beasts at Ephesus. At least we have no Scriptural record of him being thrown to the lions and living to tell about it as Daniel did. But do you see that phrase, “after the manner of men” there? That phrase means Paul is employing *a figure of speech,* similar to the one he used in Galatians 3:15, where he wrote:

**“Brethren, *I speak after the manner of men;* Though it be but a man's covenant, yet if it be confirmed, no man disannulleth, or addeth thereto.”**

In that passage, Paul spoke after the manner of men by comparing Abraham’s covenant with God to covenants that men make with each other.

So what did Paul mean when he said he fought with beasts at Ephesus? Well, what’s another name for the antichrist? The Beast! Now don’t get me wrong, Paul didn’t fight with the antichrist at Ephesus either. But that word *beast* in the Bible is associated with fallen spirits *like* the Beast.

So I believe it is possible that the Ephesians were *possessed by devils* that day, or at the very least *influenced* by fallen spirits in some way. That’s the only way I can figure they could sustain a chant like that for two solid hours.

Either way, it was certainly a *fearsome* experience for Paul to have to go through. We’ll see how God saves Paul and his coworkers in our next lesson. That’s the cliffhanger!

But in closing, this passage serves as a reminder that one lie told over and over *doesn’t make the lie true,* even if it’s told over and over by 25,000 people for two straight hours. I mean, how great is Diana *today?* Those Ephesians could have *screamed* that change *for two years,* and it wouldn’t have made her any greater.

But if you tell a lie often enough, people start to *believe* that it’s true, and no amount of shouting them down is going to make them believe otherwise, as Paul would have learned had he been able to accomplish that in Ephesus that dangerous day.

The only solution for lies like we’ve seen in this lesson is to shout *Great is the Lord Jesus Christ* over and over in your life, in as many ways as you possibly can, by being good citizens, and good craftsmen at work, and the absolute flat out best Christian you can be. That shows people the Lord is great because it shows them the great things He’s done in your life. Who’s with me?