Chapter 50: Godliness with Contentment

Acts 19:21–41

Paul spent two years laboring in Ephesus, during which time "all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks" (Acts 19:10). Not only did the residents of Asia *hear* the word of the Lord, but the word of the Lord was making progress in transforming the lives of the people in that area, leading the pagans even to confess their magic practices and to burn their magic books (Acts 19:18–19). Luke summarized the progress of the gospel in this area in Acts 19:20: "So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily." Before leaving the area, however, Paul encountered a great disturbance that results from his preaching. In this section, we see that *godliness with contentment is great gain* (1 Tim. 6:6).

Godly Contentment (Acts 19:21–22)

After the two years of ministry in Ephesus, Paul had to move on to continue his ministry as far as the Lord would send him: "Now after these events Paul resolved in the Spirit to pass through Macedonia and Achaia and go to Jerusalem, saying, 'After I have been there, I must also see Rome'" (v. 21). Lenski is probably correct that, in addition to visiting the congregations to ensure that they continued in faithfulness to the Lord, his desire to visit these churches likely has to do with the great collection that Paul sought to take up for the saints in Jerusalem (Rom. 15:25; 1 Cor. 16:1; 2 Cor. 8).[1] Bock also notes this is the beginning of Paul's travel to Jerusalem that will ultimately result in his arrest, so that Paul's stated intention here "parallels Jesus' having to go to Jerusalem in Luke's Gospel (9:51; 13:33–34)."[2] Ultimately, he will indeed go to Rome, but it will be as a prisoner who has appealed to Caesar (Acts 25:11).

While Paul remained in Asia for a while, Luke tells us that Paul "sent into Macedonia two of his helpers, Timothy and Erastus" (v. 22). This is one of the many statements throughout the book of Acts and the letters of Paul that tell us about *how* he worked with others. Paul's time and availability were limited, so he often sent his "helpers" to other places to do ministry on his behalf.

Greed and Pride (Acts 19:23–27)

Before leaving, "there arose no little disturbance concerning the Way" (v. 23). The story we have here is similar to many we have read so far within the book of Acts, in that we see resistance to the progress of Christianity. The key difference in this story, though, is the way in which the resistance to the gospel is so crassly developed along the lines of greed and desire for profitable gain. The key instigator was a silversmith named Demetrius, "who made silver shrines of Artemis" and who, in the course of his work, "brought no little

[1] Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 799.

[2] Bock, *Acts*, 606.

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business to the craftsmen" (v. 24). Bruce writes a helpful note on Artemis:

> Ephesian Artemis was a very different goddess from the "queen and huntress, chaste and fair" whom the Greeks venerated by this name; she was in origin the ancient mother goddess of Asia Minor, worshipped in that land from time immemorial as the mother of gods and men. Her temple at Ephesus was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world; her image, enshrined in that temple, was believed to be of heavenly workmanship: it appears to have been a meteorite in which the semblance of a many-breasted female was discerned. Her worship was marked by the traditional features of nature-worship; it was presided over by eunuch-priests and three grades of priestesses. She had a special festival about the time of the spring equinox, at the beginning of the month Artemision; it may have been at the time of this festival in A.D. 55 that the trouble now described by Luke broke out.[3]

Thus, both the religious and the economic spheres of Ephesus revolved to a great degree around Artemis and her temple. Any threat to her worship had far-reaching implications, as Demetrius acknowledges plainly: "Men, you know that from this business we have our wealth" (v. 25).

Demetrius then testifies that Paul's ministry has indeed had a great impact: "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" (v. 26). In believing Paul's preaching, more and more people have turned away from the worship of Artemis, leaving the tradesmen without their normal stream of customers to buy the idols they made. Demetrius is particularly offended by the idea that "gods made with hands are not gods." To the pagan mind, an image of a god made the god present for the worshiper. So, images of Artemis were a means of worshiping her in order to access her power and the blessings that she provided. The Scriptures, on the other hand, mocked the idea that such images could have power. In Isaiah 44, the prophet mocks the idol-maker who cuts down a tree, using part of the wood as fuel for a fire over which he roasts his meat, and part of the wood for an idol that he falls down to worship: "Deliver me, for you are my god!" (Isa. 44:17). The silver images may have been made of higher quality material, but the issue is the same: living gods are not made of lifeless materials.

What is astonishing about Demetrius's speech, though, is the way that he doesn't even attempt to make a *theological* argument. Instead, he is only making a *financial* argument: "from this business we have our wealth."[4] Then, he turns his financial argument into a rallying cry to protect Artemis: "there is 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

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[3] Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 397–98.

[4] "In all fairness to Demetrius, his argument was not without solid foundation. Paul did preach forcefully against idolatry and was indeed a threat to anyone who made a living from idols. He was likewise a genuine threat to the Artemis cult. He considered not only her images but the goddess herself as 'no god at all.' But one should not miss the real point of Demetrius's opposition. It was not his piety that was offended but his pocketbook. For Paul to hold his sessions in the hall of Tyrannus was one thing. People could listen to his teachings all they wanted. But when those teachings began to have ramifications for the town economy, that was quite another matter….The gospel is always at its most controversial when it comes into conflict with economic interests." (Polhill, Acts, 410.)

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magnificence, she whom all Asia and the world worship" (v. 27). The issue is not whether an idol made of silver truly could save them. Instead, the issue is whether *they* will lose their business and whether *Ephesus* will lose their patron deity, pulling greed and pride into a single, desperate plea. As Calvin observes, "all the affections of the flesh are enemies to God."[5]

Enraged Powerlessness (Acts 19:28–41)

Upon this, the craftsmen and then the wider city were thrown into uproar crying out, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" and dragging out Paul's "companions in travel" into the theater (vv. 28–29). On the reaction, Bruce writes, "When religious devotion and economic interest were simultaneously offended, a quite exceptionally fervid anger was engendered."[6] Paul himself wanted to go in, but disciples there would not permit him: "It would have made the situation worse. Paul could not have saved the two, he might even have precipitated a calamity by having himself and these two killed."[7] Luke at this point also mentions that "some of the Asiarchs, who were friends of his, sent to him and were urging him not to venture into the theater" (v. 31). The Asiarchs were some kind of officials drawn from "the wealthy and aristocratic inhabitants of the province," demonstrating that Paul's gospel had reached even the highest levels of the society.[8] At this point, the uproar of the assembly led to great "confusion," so that "most of them did not know why they had come together" (v. 32). When a Jew came forward to stop the crowd, they roared even louder, for "about two hours," crying out "with one voice" about the greatness of Artemis of the Ephesians (vv. 33–34).

After such a loud and lengthy uproar, the people settle down only when the town clerk pacifies their anger in vv. 35–40. Calvin is correct that the text seems to commend the "carnal wisdom" of the town clerk, but "not his godliness."[9] He reasons with the people, but not toward faith in Christ. Instead, he calms them by asking, "who is there who does not know that the city of the Ephesians is temple keeper of the great Artemis, and of the sacred stone that fell from the sky?" (v. 35). Yet, Paul and his companions would dispute that very point! The town clerk argues that, because this knowledge is universal, the people should "be quiet and do nothing rash" (v. 36). Further, he dismisses the charges of "sacrilege" (or, temple-robbing) and blasphemy, but he does not state that these men would indeed oppose the holiness of the temple. His main intention is to avoid rioting, and he encourages anyone with a complaint to bring charges in open court (v. 38). Peterson notes the play on words between the "danger" that Demetrius warned of back in v. 27 ("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 the "danger" that the clerk warns of, namely to be charged (by the Romans) for rioting.[10] With that, the clerk dismisses the assembly from their rioting (v. 41).

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[5] Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 2:224.

[6] Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 398.

[7] Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 808.

[8] Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 548.

[9] Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 2:231.

[10] Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 551.

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On the whole, the crowd is portrayed like animals. They rage and mindlessly cry out, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" (v. 28). They are utterly confused, uncertain about why they had come together (v. 32). They refuse to listen to reason and continue shouting mindlessly for two hours when Alexander tries to calm them down (vv. 33–34). Finally, they are pacified by the town clerk, who sidesteps the real points of conflict between them and Paul (vv. 35–40). Then, like sheep, they are dismissed and leave (v. 41). In this portrayal, we see another example of the biblical theme that "those who make [idols] become like them; so do all who trust in them" (Ps. 115:8). They become as mindless and unthinking as the idols they worship.

Discussion Questions

1. Why must Paul leave Ephesus, if he has been engaged in so much fruitful ministry there (v. 21a)? What is significant about Luke's narration of Paul's determination to go to Jerusalem (v. 21b)? What will ultimately bring Paul to Rome, and what will happen to him there (v. 21c)? How does Paul's self-sacrifice set a proper background to understand what we will see in the next sections? How do Paul's "helpers" follow in Paul's example (v. 22)?

2. What do we know about Demetrius (v. 24)? Why did pagan idolaters think that idolatry was a valuable thing? How much of an emphasis is there on the threat to the profitability of the silver and idol-making trade in Ephesus because of "the Way"? How much of an emphasis is there on the pagan pride of Ephesus? Why did Demetrius's speech have such a powerful effect on the tradesmen of Ephesus?

3. How does Luke characterize the reaction of the people to Demetrius's speech? What do they chant about Artemis? What do they do to anyone associated with Paul? How clear are they about the reason that they are rioting? What does the town clerk ultimately say to settle them down? What does the town clerk get right? What does the town clerk get wrong? What are we to take away from this section for our own lives?

4. Why do the powerless turn to pagan worship? How does God encourage us to turn to him when we feel powerless? What is the difference between seeking the blessings of Artemis and seeking the blessings of the living God? In what areas do pride and greed keep you from trusting the Lord with your powerlessness? How might you turn your eyes upon Jesus in faith as you go through your own seasons of difficulty?

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