

Acts 19:21-41: Jesus vs. The Things We Worship

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I. Introduction

There are still people in this world who worship inanimate objects. Most, if not all, educated people would consider this superstitious and foolish. But an idol is not just something made of wood, metal, or stone. There are things in this world that educated people gladly and blindly turn their entire lives over to, like a career, like looks, like love, like the approval and acceptance of others.

II. Acts 19:21-41: Does the Thing You Worship Bring You Life or Death?

19:21-22, after his powerful ministry in Ephesus, which reached all of Asia, Paul felt the Lord's Spirit draw him to Jerusalem and then to Rome. So he planned to go there after visiting and discipling the churches in Macedonia and Achaia (Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, and Corinth). In preparation for this and while Paul finished up in Asia, he sent two of his disciples: Timothy whom Paul sent to continue discipling the Corinthians and likely had the letter of 1 Corinthians with him (1 Corinthians 4:17; 16:10-11) and Erastus, another assistant to Paul (Romans 16:23; 2 Timothy 4:20). Paul's purpose in going to Jerusalem was to deliver the financial aid from all the Gentile churches to their struggling Jewish brethren. And as he made his way to Spain, he wanted to visit and disciple the church of Rome (Romans 15:22-29). He saw his ministry to the Romans and other Gentiles as a debt since the Lord had appointed him apostle to the Gentiles (Romans 1:1, 14-15). His original plan was to winter with the Corinthians, then visit Ephesus one last time before celebrating the Feast of Pentecost in Jerusalem (2 Corinthians 1:15-16; 1 Corinthians 16:5-8), but his plans were altered by what happened next.

19:23-27, the battle between Jesus and the things people worship came to a head in Ephesus. After years of Jesus freeing people from the idols that consume their lives, the idols, or rather Satan and his demons (Ephesians 6:12), fought back: Demetrius was a businessman who dealt in idols; he and his craftsmen made a lot of money selling silver shrines of the goddess Diana and her temple. But now this incredible livelihood was being threatened by Paul's message (recall the bonfire in 19:19 which totaled into the millions as people turned from their idols to the Lord). All of Asia now knew that things made by human hands had no power (Isaiah 44:9-28), much less were they gods. Thus, the sale of Demetrius' wares had plummeted. So he organized his craftsmen and others who made similar shrines. His argument ends with a religious plea that the worldwide majesty of their great goddess Diana will be destroyed if something isn't done about this guy Paul. The real reason, however, was an economic one: their livelihood was on the verge of destruction. How ironic: if Diana is so great, so majestic, why is she allowing her worshippers to suffer like this? Why doesn't she come their aid instead of the other way around? Why don't they realize that their goddess is powerless, that this idol only consumes their lives instead of provide? At whose altar do you worship and how much of your life has it consumed?

19:28-41, what's the response of those who rely on the goddess Diana for their existence? Out of control fury and rage. They scream out, "Great is Diana of the Ephesians!"—this is a desperate effort to keep their goddess alive...who's keeping who alive here? Soon the entire city was in an uproar. The giant mob seized Gaius (1 Corinthians 1:14) and Aristarchus (Colossians 4:10), Paul's assistants and disciples from Macedonia.

They drag them into the large stadium located in the center of the city, which could hold 25,000 people (it was used for social/sporting events and official city gatherings). Paul wanted to face the mob, but the disciples wouldn't let him (they would've killed him and this is likely what he referred to in 1 Corinthians 15:32 [see also 2 Corinthians 1:8-11] when he said he fought wild beasts at Ephesus—as a Roman citizen, Paul couldn't be thrown to the lions/beasts). Some of the officials who governed the province of Asia, Paul's friends, also sent word to him not to enter the stadium.

The mob was so out of control that some were screaming about one thing while others about something else and most didn't know why they were there. At this point the non-Christian Jews push Alexander forward to make a defense. They likely feared that the mob would turn on them since they also refused to worship Diana. They wanted the mob to know that they too disagreed with Paul. But when the mob realized he was Jewish, they screamed out in unison for two hours, "Great is Diana of the Ephesians!" At this point, the city clerk steps in. He was the most important official in the city. He was in charge of the city's money, archives, and presided over all public assemblies. He was the intermediary between the city council and the Roman government.

What he says next about their goddess, though an attempt to extol her majesty, lays her bare. He's trying to protect Ephesus from Roman punishment for this illegal assembly. So he states what all know and believe: Diana came from heaven, sent by Zeus to Ephesus. The world knows her greatness and that the Ephesians are her temple guardians. If Diana is a god from heaven and the Ephesians are her personal guardians, why are they in danger of being punished by the Romans? Why doesn't Diana vanquish Paul and these pesky Christians? Instead of proving Diana's great power, the clerk actually reveals Diana's complete inability to deliver her worshippers. Life is uncertain, chaotic, and ultimately doomed when we place our life and meaning in things that are actually lifeless, whether a statue made of silver or a high-powered career, or anything else. When it's gone, we become frantic.

But there's a reality facing this mob; they're about to be swallowed up by their goddess, i.e., if they persist in this mob act, the Romans will punish them severely for something they hate most: a rioting mob. The things we worship actually consume us. The clerk goes further and declares Paul's companions innocent, they've neither robbed Diana's temple nor defamed her! If Demetrius had a legitimate claim, he could take them to court, even before their highest court presided over by the Roman proconsul. And if there's something else this mob wants to address, then it must be in a lawful assembly. Having said these things, he dismissed the mob.....who won this battle Jesus or the great goddess Diana? Who did Jesus use to protect Timothy and Erastus?

What idols have we made and are we so blind that we can't see them? Where do you get your meaning, your hope, your happiness, your identity? God points out the utter foolishness in worshipping something made by our own hands (Isaiah 44:9-28). We can see the folly in this type of worship, but what idols have we made, which are now consuming us in our ignorance?



III. Conclusion

Now when they heard *this*, they were full of wrath and cried out, saying, "Great is Diana of the Ephesians!" So the whole city was filled with confusion, and rushed into the theater with one accord, having seized Gaius and Aristarchus, Macedonians, Paul's travel companions.... And when the city clerk had quieted the crowd, he said: "Men of Ephesus, what man is there who does not know that the city of the Ephesians is temple guardian of the great goddess Diana, and of the *image* which fell down from Zeus? Therefore, since these things cannot be denied, you ought to be quiet and do nothing rashly. For you have brought these men here who are neither robbers of temples nor blasphemers of your goddess. Therefore, if Demetrius and his fellow craftsmen have a case against anyone, the courts are open and there are proconsuls. Let them bring charges against one another. But if you have any other inquiry to make, it shall be determined in the lawful assembly. For we are in danger of being called in question for today's uproar, there being no reason which we may give to account for this disorderly gathering." And when he had said these things, he dismissed the assembly.