

- d. Luke used his second parenthesis to provide a glimpse into Paul's future. He did so by taking note of Paul's designs when the time came for him to depart from Ephesus (19:21-22). Highlighted in this treatment was Paul's intention to travel to Jerusalem and then eventually to Rome, and Luke importantly attached this design to the leading of the Spirit. The implication is that Paul would indeed realize his goal because the sovereign will of the Spirit lay behind it. But more than that, if the Spirit was directing his path toward Jerusalem and Rome, He obviously had purposeful work for Paul in those cities.

At this point in Luke's narrative there is no indication of what that purpose might be, but it will soon become evident: From the point of Paul's departure from Ephesus, Luke committed the balance of his Acts account to recording the fulfillment of what he here introduced. Paul would indeed return to Jerusalem – a goal which he embraced although he knew suffering and bonds awaited him there (20:22-23). So also he would realize his dream of going to Rome, though he could hardly have imagined the circumstances that would bring it about. The Spirit had warned him that trouble and suffering were to be his constant companions, but even so he couldn't have predicted that he would travel to Rome as its prisoner in order to appear before Caesar. The Spirit had formed Paul's burden, but only He knew how it would be fulfilled.

Paul's immediate goal upon leaving Ephesus was to travel to Jerusalem and arrive in time for Pentecost (20:16). Again, he didn't know the larger purpose the Spirit had for him in Jerusalem; he knew only that trouble awaited him. But Paul was undeterred because he was fully committed to delivering to the struggling Jerusalem saints the offering he'd requested of the churches of Macedonia and Achaia (ref. 1 Corinthians 16:1-6; 2 Corinthians 8:1-9:5). This explains in part his long, back-tracking route in returning to Jerusalem. Comparing the pertinent texts, it appears that Paul may have spent the better part of a year on that journey from Ephesus to Jerusalem (cf. again 20:16 with 1 Corinthians 16:1-8).

Luke further recorded that Paul sent Timothy and Erastus on into Macedonia while he remained behind in Ephesus. It's possible that Timothy was carrying Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, and it is also likely that Paul had instructed him and Erastus to have the various churches prepare for the offering so that things would be in place when he arrived and there would be no surprises or delays (ref. 19:22; cf. 1 Corinthians 16:10-11).

The sequence of events is far from certain, but many scholars believe Timothy returned to Ephesus shortly after with news of trouble at Corinth, which provoked a short visit by Paul. That painful visit led Paul to write his "sorrowful letter" and send it to Corinth with Titus (ref. 2 Corinthians 2:1-11, 7:5-9). Titus' visit also facilitated the completion of the preparation for the offering for Jerusalem – preparation that apparently had been sidetracked by the conflict between Paul and members of the Corinthian church (ref. again 2 Corinthians 8:16-9:5).

- e. Paul would later write to the Corinthians that he had determined to remain in Ephesus until Pentecost because the Lord had opened a “*great and effectual door*” for him. Luke’s account (19:11-20) shows that God was turning the city upside down, and Paul was at the center of that upheaval. He was experiencing the power of Christ’s kingdom at work in Ephesus and was convinced he needed to continue his labors there.

The Spirit had opened at Ephesus a mighty and effectual door for the gospel and it was bearing its fruit. *However, just as in every place, the gospel’s fruit in Ephesus had a negative as well as positive side.*

- On the one hand, numerous individuals who had been deeply committed to the magical arts (whether as metaphysical philosophy, personal religion, or business) were forsaking that enterprise and turning to Christ.
- On the other hand, many others perceived the power of the kingdom and its effect in their community as a threat to their way of life and personal livelihoods and so took a militant stand against it. This negative fruit of the gospel is the subject of Luke’s third episode.

The occult arts of Ephesus’ magicians was but one expression of magic as the defining characteristic of fallen man’s involvement with external reality. Man in his estranged condition is self-isolated and therefore constrained to perceive, assess and interact with everything outside himself through the lens of himself and his own self-interest. Any given thing is appraised and embraced or rejected based upon how the individual person perceives that thing in relation to himself (Matthew 5:46-47). This is true in every realm of human existence, including spirituality and religion. Again, whatever their distinctions, all religion is magic.

Thus the Jews of the Ephesian synagogue were no different from their pagan, occult counterparts. Both looked to their own resource to secure personal benefit from spiritual powers, whether imagined, demonic or Yahweh Himself. So it was with Ephesus’ artisans. They, too, were “magicians,” but of a more pragmatic sort. The Jews and occult practitioners shared common ground in that both were motivated by spiritual concerns (at least in part). The artisans, however, had no such pretensions; their interest in religion was purely material. Religion’s always provided the opportunity for high profits, and it was no different at Ephesus.

- There was money to be made in producing and selling occult texts, and the practitioners themselves charged for their services. Doubtless multitudes in and around Ephesus made their living from the magical arts, and this, too, testifies to the power of the gospel. For many of those who renounced their former practices, faith in Christ came at no small cost.
- But the Ephesian business of religion extended beyond occultism; cultural paganism provided its own opportunities for financial gain.

Like every major city in the Greco-Roman world, Ephesus had considerable religious infrastructure. The focal point was the temple to Artemis (not the Greek Artemis, but a local manifestation of the Asian mother of the gods worshipped for centuries), but the city would have also boasted numerous other religious sites. But whether temples or other related structures, these facilities were industries in themselves. In addition to the priests and other workers who carried out the daily religious duties, there would have been many other individuals who performed custodial and maintenance activities. Beyond that, there were those who provided the animals for the sacrificial rituals and others who processed the resultant carcasses and presented them for sale in the marketplace. In a place like Athens, filled with altars, shrines and temples, it is likely that the majority of the city's residents obtained their livelihood in connection with the business of religion.

Personal concern is always at the heart of people's rejection of the gospel (as also their false embrace of it), and one of the most compelling of those concerns is financial well-being. It's one thing to embrace Christ in the face of ridicule and scorn by one's family, friends and associates; it's quite another to do so at the price of the loss of one's livelihood – especially in a time and culture in which there were no social “safety nets.” Without other help, if a man lost his ability to provide for his family they would either be reduced to beggars or starve to death.

This was the concern facing the artisans of Ephesus. The Spirit's attendance upon Paul's gospel ministry was resulting in multitudes renouncing their pagan ways and turning to Christ. But these individuals weren't going away quietly; standing together with Paul, they were becoming a growing chorus proclaiming throughout the city the absurdity and futility of worshipping pagan deities – gods who are actually nothing more than the product of human imagination, devised to serve the interests of their creators.

It was only a matter of time before this came to the attention of a craftsman named Demetrius, a silversmith described by Luke as deriving his income from Ephesus' official devotion to Artemis (Ephesus' title was *Temple Warden of Artemis*). When he became aware of the Christian message and the effect it was having, he immediately grasped the gravity of the situation. Demetrius produced silver shrines for Artemis' worship, and evidently was the leader of the Ephesian guild since he was the source of contracts for many other craftsmen. Between his own work and the percentage he took from the labors of his fellows, Demetrius would have made a handsome living (19:23-24). Now he stood to lose everything if this Way triumphed in Ephesus, and he wasn't about to let that happen.

Seeing his financial decimation looming on the horizon, Demetrius convened a meeting of his fellow guild members along with other tradesmen. Luke's account indicates that he had done some research and discovered that this disturbing development was no local phenomenon (19:26). What was happening at Ephesus was occurring throughout Asia (ref. again 19:9-10), and if something wasn't done soon it would be too late. Everything they knew would be changed forever.

Clearly Demetrius' fundamental concern was his own financial well-being, but he also rightly recognized that the larger effect of this Way would be the debunking and dethroning of Artemis and, with her, all the deities and powers worshipped by the Ephesians (19:27). It wasn't simply the livelihoods of countless people that was at stake; this Way threatened to dismantle the very culture and social fabric of Ephesus, the province of Asia, and ultimately the entire Greco-Roman world. Though his perspective and concerns differed from the Thessalonian Jews, Demetrius discerned the same terrifying truth: The gospel was turning the world upside down and, if it prevailed, nothing would ever be the same again (ref. 17:6).

And so, while many read this context and are distracted by the images of city-wide chaos and the confused proceedings in the Ephesian theatre, Luke's point is something else altogether – something much more subtle but infinitely more significant and compelling. The civil unrest and ensuing violent confrontation were simply a reactionary symptom of the main issue: *The people of Ephesus were responding to the world-transforming power and effect of Christ's gospel.*

Luke used this episode to punctuate and reinforce what has been a constant and core theme in his Acts account, namely that, in His Son, God has effected cosmic cataclysm. He has judged and brought to an end the former order of things and ushered in the everlasting age of the new creation. Christ's accomplishment reached its apex in His enthronement and outpouring of His Spirit, and the Spirit's abiding presence and transforming power are the undeniable evidence that things have changed forever. The artisans and citizens of Ephesus didn't understand what they were witnessing, but they discerned its power and were terrified by it.

Thus the chaos in Ephesus reflected *confusion* and *fear* more than ideological indignation or financial concerns. Predictably, the assembly of artisans expressed their outrage in terms of patriotism and devotion to cultural norms – “*Great is Artemis of the Ephesians,*” but such natural loyalties are incapable of provoking the intense, almost manic passions that erupted in the hearts of those men. Only the most primal concerns can produce what transpired that day in Ephesus.

Luke doesn't explain how the artisans' outrage spilled over into the populace. It's possible that they left their meeting having agreed to intentionally instigate an uprising in the city, thereby generating enough momentum against the advocates of this Way that they could deal with it in decisive fashion (cf. 17:5, 13). More likely the uprising occurred spontaneously, with people in the streets being swept into the frenzied confusion by the “power of the mob” as agitation and incendiary charges spread like wildfire across the city.

Whatever the specific mechanism, soon a riotous mob – including many Jews – was moving through Ephesus looking to bring Paul and his associates to justice. As at Thessalonica, they didn't find Paul (17:4-7), but seized Gaius and Aristarchus and dragged them into the city's theater. (This theater was the meeting place of the Ephesian civic assembly and accommodated 25,000 people.)

Inside the meeting hall the confused pandemonium reached a fever pitch. Luke recorded that most of those present had been caught up in the energy and passion of the moment and had no idea what all the commotion was really about. Thus the theater scene was one of utter chaos, with various groups of people shouting claims and charges back and forth. Almost certainly Gaius and Aristarchus were convinced they were going to be torn to pieces before it was all over.

The chaotic situation was further aggravated when the Jews put forth a man named Alexander to provide a defense of Judaism in view of Paul's being a Jew and Judaism being associated with the Way. But the plan backfired: The mob recognized that Judaism presented its own threat to Ephesus' religious identity and industry and exploded in a long chant of devotion to Artemis (19:32-34).

Meanwhile, when Paul learned what was happening in the theater he determined to go there himself. Luke is silent about Paul's intention, but the repeated staunch objection of the disciples and other friends who were members of the provincial council suggests that he intended to present his own defense. These men would have known of Paul's fearless zeal for Christ and likely were aware of many of his past experiences. They'd have expected him to want to address the assembly, and all the more because his Roman citizenship could afford him an audience.

Because his fellows were ultimately able to prevail, it's impossible to know either Paul's exact intention or what would have come of his presence in the theater. What did happen is that the city clerk (chancellor) eventually gained control of the situation, both by rational arguments and measured threats. (Ephesus was a free city and this man was the leading magistrate, elected by the people and accountable to the Roman provincial proconsul. He played a key role in drafting local legislation and so his judgment and word carried legal authority.)

This official first reassured the assembly that neither Artemis nor her status or worship was in danger. All men knew that Ephesus was the guardian of Artemis and her cult, and a group of religious radicals wouldn't be able to alter that fact (19:35-36). But he also insisted that he had heard no evidence that Gaius and Aristarchus – and by implication, the followers of this Way – were seeking by criminal or subversive activity to undermine Artemis' worship (19:37). And that being the case, the clerk warned the assembly that any and all charges needed to be legally adjudicated. What had transpired that day was utterly unacceptable and put the city in danger of coming under Roman censure. Rome knew all too well how quickly civil unrest escalates into insurrection and the Roman provincial authorities were expected to maintain control and order at all costs.

The clerk was able to defuse the situation, but that didn't end the variance which provoked it. Consistent with Luke's overall account, this episode highlights the enduring conflict between Christ's kingdom and the city of man. Though cloaked in religious, legal and/or patriotic terms, the conflict actually occurs at the level of the estranged human heart – a heart that knows not God and wants what it wants.