



# WHY DO THE NATIONS RAGE?

SERIES: *LIFE UNLEASHED*

Acts 19:21–41  
42nd Message  
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Have you ever been in the midst of a riot? It was a hot summer day on August 16, 1970 as Emily, my sister and I made our way with tens of thousands of Italians to the Piazza del Campo in Siena for the famed Palio, a wild, bareback, medieval-style horse race held twice each summer to determine bragging rights for one of the seventeen city districts called “Contrada.” The rivalries are fierce and all consuming, uniting passions of civic pride, religion and sports. Anything goes as long as you win. The greatest disgrace is to come in second. The pageantry and ceremonial buildup is typically Italian, meaning endless. There is more ritual at the Palio than you can comprehend. At 8:00 am the Bishop gives mass for the ten jockeys, who are actually hired guns. After the mass there is the mayor’s signature of authorization at 10:30. At 3:00 pm each district conducts a ceremonial blessing for their horse, which was chosen at random and for which the rider has no experience. After the blessing the horse joins the massive parade winding through the city.

Meanwhile, we were attempting to work our way into the center of the piazza to secure a good vantage spot amid a boiling sea of 10,000 spectators, some of whom passed out in the heat even before the race began. After some aggressive maneuvering, we were able to secure a spot against the wooden railing for a ringside view of the race. Finally at 5:00 pm the parade arrived at the entrance to the piazza. Dripping in sweat, I breathed a sigh of relief thinking the race was about to start. I forgot I was in Italy. This was just the beginning of a two-hour pageant of more than 600 participants in full medieval regalia, along with scores of horses, flag tossers and drummers displaying the colors and pride of their districts.

Just when I thought we could no longer endure being in this claustrophobic pressure cooker, the gun sounded and the horses were off, three laps around the treacherous track in 90 seconds. The race was a blur as the horses whirled around us at breakneck speed. At one of the 90-degree turns a jockey was thrown off his horse and trampled by the oncoming horses. As the horse lay dead on the track, I feared that the jockey had suffered a similar fate. Tensions in the crowd quickly rose to a boiling point and my only concern was to get out of the piazza as quickly as possible. With only two exits available, we slipped under the railing onto to the track and began running in the opposite direction from the accident. To my horror I discovered that an angry mob was coming towards us from the opposite direction. Our only escape was to climb up into the makeshift bleachers that scaled the buildings. After that my memory is a blur. I have a vague recollection of helping Emily and my sister into the stands as the mob whirled past us, then tentatively making our way through the narrow streets back to our car, unscathed. But what I’ll never forget is the absolute terror of a mob unbridled of all restraint.

Paul’s two and half years in Ephesus had been his longest, most fruitful and productive ministry. Last week we observed how Paul’s tireless preaching unleashed the power of the Spirit, bringing life and

healing throughout the city of Ephesus and the wider community. The most striking example was the public confession of former magicians, who renounced their former practices by publicly burning their costly magic books worth 50,000 pieces of silver. Luke’s mention of “silver” raises a little warning flag. In our text today we learn what happens when the gospel begins to have a financial impact on a community and threatens the profits of the powerful. The enemy is not about to go down without a fight, and when he strikes back, there are no rules, just like the Palio. As we pick up the story, Luke gives us a glimpse into Paul’s plans and visionary spirit.

## I. Visionary Planning in the Spirit (19:21–22)

**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.” And having sent into Macedonia two of his helpers, Timothy and Erastus, he himself stayed in Asia for a while. (19:21–22 ESV)**

Luke’s opening words are better translated, “when these things had been fulfilled,” conveying the sense of a completion of a sacred mission. After two and half years of ministry the foundations of the gospel were secured on both shores of the Aegean Sea, so now Paul felt free to move on to new uncharted territory where the gospel had not been preached. It is the Spirit that continues to direct Paul’s mission and makes the goal of seeing Rome, the heart of the empire, a “divine necessity” (δεῖ — “it is necessary”). In his letter to the Romans, Paul explains the purpose of his visit to Jerusalem was to deposit the money he has collected from the Gentile churches and that, after Rome, his ultimate aim was Spain, the westerly outpost of Roman civilization (Rom 15:23–25). As Craig Keener notes,

Luke here provides an itinerary for the rest of Acts...Achaia (20:1–4), Jerusalem (21:15–23:30), and Rome (28:16–31)...after revisiting his churches, Paul must go to Rome via Jerusalem... Thus the rest of Acts happens according to God’s plan, which Paul deliberately follows because he is led by the Spirit.<sup>1</sup>

Following Jesus’ pattern of discipleship of sending messengers ahead of him after he set his face to go to Jerusalem (Luke 9:52), Paul sent Timothy and Erastus as messengers to prepare his way into Macedonia, while he remained in Ephesus.

## II. The Silversmith’s Inflammatory Speech (19:23–27)

**About that time there arose no little disturbance concerning the Way. For a man named Demetrius, a silversmith, who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought no little business to the craftsmen. These he gathered together, with the workmen in similar trades, and said, “Men, you know that from this business we have our wealth. 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. And 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 magnificence, she whom all Asia and the world worship.” (19:23–27)

#### A. Artemis of Ephesus

Before Paul left Ephesus, a riot broke out in the city that could have dealt a death blow to the apostle’s mission in Asia. The uproar was instigated by a silversmith named Demetrius, who was enraged that the profits of his once lucrative trade were falling sharply as a result of many who were turning away from the idolatry of Artemis, Ephesus’ major goddess. Demetrius took things into his own hands and gathered the silversmiths and other tradesmen to stir them to action. Keener notes that assembling such a crowd at short notice was not as difficult as we might imagine.

Members of various trades typically lived in particular sections of town, sections that often took their names from the trades that worked there. In Ephesus, the silversmiths’ shops were situated on what was later called Arkadiane Street, a street that ran from the theater to the harbor, the colonnade on each side of the street housed shops. Despite some economic competition, members of trades met together regularly for common meals (which invoked their patron deity, in this case Artemis) and other common interests.<sup>2</sup>

Richard Longenecker gives some of the background on the Artemis cult:

Artemis of Ephesus was...a Near-Eastern mother-goddess of fertility. Her image at Ephesus, believed to have been fashioned in heaven and to have fallen from the sky...Probably the Ephesian Artemis was originally a meteorite that resembled a multi-breasted woman and became the object of worship... With the silting up of the harbor, the Temple of Artemis became the primary basis for Ephesus’s wealth and continued prosperity. Situated one and one-half miles northeast of the city, measuring about 425 feet by 225 in size. Thousands of pilgrims and tourists came to it from far and near; around it swarmed all sorts of tradesmen and hucksters who made their living by supplying visitors with food and lodging, dedicatory offerings, and souvenirs. The Temple of Artemis was also a major treasury and bank of the ancient world, where merchants, kings, and even cities made deposits, and where their money could be kept safe under the protection of deity.<sup>3</sup>

As the cult of Ephesian Artemis spread worldwide it brought an immense revenue into the city, making Ephesus the most prominent city and wealthiest province in the empire.

#### B. Demetrius’ speech

Speaking man to man, Demetrius knows what strings to pull and goes right for the jugular, “our wealth” (*εὐπορία* – “the result of having wealth, prosperity”) is being threatened (so common in political rhetoric). Demetrius substantiates his claim with the truth of what Paul taught, that “gods made with hands are not gods,” and the impact that his teaching was having on countless citizens in Ephesus and all of Asia. Adding fuel to the flame, Demetrius warns of even greater “threats to honor in an ascending hierarchy of values.”<sup>4</sup>

First their prosperity is threatened; then the **metalworkers’ trade** will fall into disrepute; then **the temple** of the great goddess will be “counted as nothing” (a brilliant accounting metaphor, i.e. the bank will be bankrupt!); finally like dominos falling one after

another, **Artemis** herself may be “deposed from her magnificence, she whom all Asia and the world worship.” Chicken little, the sky is falling! “In a culture where honor and shame were primary values and threats to Artemis’s honor could be punished with the death penalty, Demetrius’s warning would stir hearers.”<sup>5</sup> Tom Wright calls this “The perfect storm of economic disruption, religious challenge, civic pride, and ethnic prejudice”<sup>6</sup> which will be extremely difficult to contain.

Sadly, this rhetorical strategy has been all too common among politicians and dictators, for which Hitler is the supreme example. He was a master at using trigger words dense with emotion to whip crowds up into a frenzy, making them believe that their economy, national pride and race were under extreme threat. He wrote in *Mein Kampf*,

The receptivity of the great masses is very limited, their intelligence is small, but their power of forgetting is enormous. In consequence of these facts, all effective propaganda must be limited to a very few points and must harp on these in slogans until the last member of the public understands what you want him to understand by your slogan. As soon as you sacrifice this slogan and try to be many-sided, the effect will piddle away, for the crowd can neither digest nor retain the material offered.<sup>7</sup>

### III. The Crowd is Incited (19:28–34)

#### A. Paul prevented from intervening (19:28–31)

When they heard this they were enraged and were crying out, “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” So the city was filled with the confusion, and they rushed together into the theater, dragging with them Gaius and Aristarchus, Macedonians who were Paul’s companions in travel. But when Paul wished to go in among the crowd, the disciples would not let him. And even some of the Asiarchs, who were friends of his, sent to him and were urging him not to venture into the theater. (19:28–31)

Demetrius’ incendiary speech lit the fuse of the workers’ rage and quickly enflamed mob violence. They spilled out into the streets “with their threatening rhythmic chanting, their fists raised in unison, their collective anger growing to much more than the sum of its parts, and their readiness to do anything at all, including murder, to satisfy the lust that had been aroused.”<sup>8</sup> As they headed up Arkadiane Street, word spread quickly and the mob attracted more and more adherents, ever increasing in size and force. Before entering the theater some of the crowd took a short detour to the auditorium where Paul was teaching and grabbed two of his faithful colleagues from Macedonia, Gaius and Aristarchus, and dragged them into the theater. Fortunately they did not find Paul, which most likely spared his life. Luke adds a light touch of humor, “So the city was filled with confusion, and rushed into the theater “in one accord.” Ephesus the great city **united** in their **confusion**.

Hearing of the fate of his friends, Paul sought to enter the fray. Even at the risk of his life, Paul would never miss an opportunity to preach the gospel. In this case he was eager to clear up misconceptions of his message for the sake of both his friends and the gospel. But both his disciples and some of the Asiarchs prevented him. “The Asiarchs were members of the noblest and wealthiest families of the province of Asia and were bound together in a league for promoting the cult of the emperor and Rome.”<sup>9</sup> The fact that Luke says these Asiarchs were Paul’s friends is remarkable and suggests they were patrons who sponsored his teaching. Keener suggests that

In return, these benefactors expect public honor. For Paul to be associated with this riot or with charges of subverting Artemis's honor would have diminished their honor, so they do not want him to enter the assembly and thereby draw attention to his role in the matter at hand...Although Paul might have disregarded his friends' warning, he was morally constrained to heed the message sent by the Asiarchs who had publicly supported his teaching."<sup>10</sup>

#### B. Alexander fails to intervene (19:32–34)

**Now some cried out one thing, some another, for the assembly was in confusion, and most of them did not know why they had come together. Some of the crowd prompted Alexander, whom the Jews had put forward. And Alexander, motioning with his hand, wanted to make a defense to the crowd. But when they recognized that he was a Jew, for about two hours they all cried out with one voice, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" (19:32–34)**

Luke continues with more ironic humor. The assembly is fueled with force and energy, yet it is going nowhere. They have no idea why they have come together. The leaders in the Jewish community were anxious to distance themselves from Paul and his teaching. They put forth one of their own, Alexander, to set the record straight, but their plan backfires. When Alexander signals with his hand to get the crowd's attention, they immediately recognize that he is a Jew, which ignites their hostility and gets the choir singing "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" even more passionately for two more hours.

#### C. The call the pray (Psalm 86)

Though Paul is off stage during the riot, there is no doubt what he was doing behind the scenes. He was praying. Writing to the Corinthians Paul wrote that he "fought with wild beasts in Ephesus" (1 Cor 15:32) and that his sufferings in Ephesus were so severe he and his colleagues were so utterly burdened beyond their strength that they despaired of life itself. "Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death" (2 Cor 1:8–9a). He goes on to say that "this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead" (2 Cor 1:9b). But God delivered him in answer to his prayers and will continue to deliver him, "as you help us by your prayers" (2 Cor 1:11). If we wonder what Paul prayed, I suspect that one of the sacred psalms that fit his situation came to his lips. As I was reading Psalm 86 last week it struck me as one example that would have given Paul's words confidence and fervor as he prayed to his Lord.

[At this point in the service, Chris Bunce came on to the stage dressed as the apostle Paul and prayed Psalm 86 on his knees]

### III. The Town Clerk Intervenes (19:35–41)

#### A. The town clerk calms the crowd and defends the disciples

**And when the town clerk had quieted the crowd, he said, "Men of Ephesus, 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? Seeing then that these things cannot be denied, you ought to be quiet and do nothing rash. For you have brought these men here who are neither sacrilegious nor blasphemers of our goddess. (19:35–37)**

The town clerk, "clerk of the city assembly" knows far more about the charges behind the riot than the crowd. Craig Keener suggests that,

When Demetrius's allies apprehended two of Paul's colleagues (19:29), Paul and others immediately sought the help of highly placed friends. Although access to patrons was normally during set times in the morning, the riot created an emergency situation, and the Asiarchs' own honor was at stake. The Asiarchs, who knew Ephesian politics well, thus would have insisted that Paul stay out of the theater while they contacted city officials who shared their status and with whom they had reciprocally beneficial relationships...The clerk was one of the highest officials in Ephesus and was the official with whom Demetrius and his followers should have first lodged their complaint.<sup>11</sup>

The clerk begins by building rapport with the crowd and appeals to their civic pride, "Who does not know...Ephesus is the temple keeper?" Artemis is so glorious and the matter so undeniable—a treasure given by the gods in heaven, how can there be the slightest bit of danger? Stay calm, there is no threat. In contrast, don't **you** do anything rash, for these men are innocent of blaspheming the temple or the goddess, which are charges Demetrius failed to bring to court.

#### B. The town clerk warns the crowd (19:38–41)

**If therefore Demetrius and the craftsmen with him have a complaint against anyone, the courts are open, and there are proconsuls. Let them bring charges against one another. But if you seek anything further, it shall be settled in the regular assembly. For we really are in danger of being charged with rioting today, since there is no cause that we can give to justify this commotion." And when he had said these things, he dismissed the assembly. (19:38–41)**

The clerk's explicit naming of Demetrius is a public rebuke and distances the crowd from his guilt. If Demetrius and his colleagues want to file charges, the court is in session. And by the way, I am the one you should have filed charges with. Finally, though Artemis' glory is not in danger, there is indeed danger because of your failure to file a legal accusation, the city could be accused of *στάσις* ("uprising, riot, revolt, rebellion") and lose its status as a "free city," the greatest disgrace possible. On two other occasions in the first century Rome had to carry out investigations concerning the temple establishment, and city officials were not eager for a third. With that, the clerk dismissed the assembly and order was restored. Comparing the two speeches, Keener notes a certain irony between them.

Demetrius' "speech incites the riot"; the clerk's speech "ends it." Demetrius considers Paul a danger to the Artemis cult; the clerk denies it...In a sense, Demetrius takes Paul and his faith more seriously than the clerk's words do. Conversely, the clerk's view coincides with the narrator's when he declares Paul's companions innocent and the riot unjustifiable (cf. 17:5–9; 24:5, 12).<sup>12</sup>

Having the benefit of hindsight, we realize the historic irony that Demetrius was correct, as the spread of the gospel ultimately supplanted the worship of Artemis of Ephesus.

### IV. Reflections

#### A. Why do the nations rage?

Whenever the gospel is rightly preached it calls for radical transformation that challenges how we live. The kingdom of God has come to set the world right, bringing justice to the oppressed, liberty to the captives, a home to the foreigner, and protection for the widow and orphan. The gospel will always challenge the interests

of the powerful and when this occurs, the enemy is not about to go down without a fight, and when he strikes back, there are no rules.

### B. What protects us?

In Paul's case the simple answer was the governing authorities, which has been the case throughout the book of Acts. In Philippi, Paul received an official public apology; in Corinth, Gallio ruled on his behalf; and now in Ephesus, the town clerk proclaims Paul's innocence and steers any further accusations into the courts with a sharp rebuke to Demetrius. But there is more to it than that. We must ask why did they protect him?

First, I'm convinced when Paul was not permitted to enter the stadium that he prayed. I chose Psalm 86 as just one example of how he might have prayed trusting in God's loyal-love and faithfulness. At the close of the Psalm the poet asks,

Show me a sign of your favor,  
that those who hate me may see and be put to shame  
because you, LORD, have helped me and comforted me.  
(Ps 86:17)

In Paul's case the sign would have been the Town Clerk's intervention.

The second important factor was Paul's godly character, demonstrated by his ability to create significant friendships with high-ranking officials who were not believers. It was the Asiarchs who intervened on his behalf, sponsored his teaching, prevented him from entering the stadium, and most likely were the ones who informed the Town Clerk about Paul's character and the riot. It was the custom of the day that they would finance public events, but they demonstrated a friendship that went way beyond expectations. They were obviously impressed by Paul's impressive scholarship and reasoned arguments, his ability to engage people's questions with grace and skill, but most of all, it was his passionate love for people, regardless of rank, that won them over. Do you have significant friendships with unbelievers in your community? Paul makes it a requirement that church leaders "have a good reputation with outsiders" (1 Tim 3:7). Tom Wright asks, following Paul's example,

Have we learned the lesson of being so definite in our witness to the powerful name of Jesus that people will indeed find their vested interests radically challenged, while being so innocent in our actual behavior that there will be nothing to accuse us of? There is a fine line to be trodden between quiet, ineffective 'preaching' of a 'gospel' which will make no impact on real life, on the one hand, and a noisy, disruptive, personally and socially offensive proclamation on the other.<sup>13</sup>

There comes a time in everyone's life when you are so utterly burdened beyond your strength that, like Paul, you may despair of life itself. It's a great day in the kingdom that when you are at your greatest weakness, God uses your friends, especially those who do not yet follow Jesus, to intervene on your behalf and deliver you. Amen.

1. Craig S. Keener, 15:1–23:35, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary* 3 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 2860.

2. Keener, *Acts*, 3:2886, 2903.

3. Richard N. Longenecker, *Acts, EBC* 9; ed. Frank E. Gaebelin and J. D. Douglas; Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), paragraph 52236.

4. Keener, *Acts*, 3:2894.

5. Keener, *Acts*, 3:2894.

6. N. T. Wright, *Paul, A Biography* (New York: HarperOne, 2018). 263.

7. "Adolf Hitler: Excerpts from Mein Kampf," Jewish Virtual Library, 15 May, 2019, Online: <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/excerpts-from-mein-kampf>.

8. N.T. Wright, *Acts for Everyone: Part Two*, Chapters 13-28 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 120.

9. Longenecker, *Acts*, paragraph 52240.

10. Keener, *Acts*, 3:2908, 2918.

11. Keener, *Acts*, 3:2925, 2927.

12. Keener, *Acts*, 3:2890-2891.

13. Wright, *Acts for Everyone*, 123.