

# Acts

## Acts 19:21 to 20:12 - The madness of crowds

Following on from the ironic twist in Ephesus in Acts 19:13-20, when the Spirit healed people through Paul's sweat bands, while an evil spirit left people naked and bleeding, you'd think people might become a little cautious about trying to thwart the obvious reality and power of the kingdom of God.

But while Paul continued his travels round "the province of Asia" (Acts 19:22), "there arose a great disturbance about the Way," **verse 23**. The man who started it was a "silversmith named Demetrius, who made silver shrines of Artemis," which had provided a lucrative business for his fellow craftsmen. And it was lucrative all right because the temple of Artemis was one of the seven great wonders of the world, and a huge tourist attraction. Artemis had a magical mystique about her too, because she may have been carved from a meteorite that "fell from the sky" (verse 35), and in her design she was a many breasted woman picturing a great Mother figure. And for a whole month every year Ephesus celebrated her motherliness in a rowdy festival that filled the city with revellers. And it just so happened that Acts 19 was the time of year this festival was held. So picture a massive crowd of people in high spirits buying up all these little silver souvenirs being churned out by Demetrius and Co.

Demetrius turns out to be a very useful chap in the Holy Spirit's purpose, however, which was to show **the madness of a crowd** being a major weapon used by evil to destroy the impact of the kingdom of God. And you can sense the urgency of evil here, because, as Demetrius points out in **verse 26**, "you see and hear how this fellow Paul has convinced and led astray large numbers of people here in Ephesus and in practically the whole province of Asia."

And it was true too, because when Paul arrived in Ephesus it was a city soaked in superstition, demonism and black magic that had locked people in endless fear, uncertainty and misery. But only **two years later** (verse 10) the Holy Spirit, pretty well single-handedly through Paul, had these evil enslaved Ephesians "openly confessing their evil deeds" (verse 18), and the practitioners of the magical arts building a massive bonfire and burning all their magic charts and scrolls (verse 19). The equivalent of 50,000 day's wages went up in smoke. So Demetrius wasn't exaggerating the impact Paul had had, and nor could Paul be blamed for thinking his work was finished in Ephesus and it was time for him to move on (verse 21).

So why had so many people in Ephesus become Christians? Well it was Demetrius who nailed it in his accusation against Paul, that Paul was saying, “man-made gods are no gods at all,” **verse 26**. Actually, Paul hadn’t said that. He hadn’t said anything against the gods, the temple, or the superstitions of the Ephesians, as the city clerk admitted in **verse 37**, when he said that neither Paul nor the Christians “have robbed our temples or blasphemed our goddess.” They didn’t need to, because the Spirit had made it obvious that all the man-made gods and the practitioners of the black arts were no match for the power the Holy Spirit had given to Paul.

Paul hadn’t criticized the Athenians for all their gods either. He hadn’t entered either city spoiling for a fight. He’d simply taught about Jesus, and then through “extraordinary miracles“ in Ephesus (verse 11) the Holy Spirit demonstrated just how real this new dimension was that had opened up since Jesus’ resurrection, and in such a way that the man-made stuff of this world became so empty and pointless by comparison. But who needs any of this man-made stuff anyway when the mighty Jesus is in charge of everything, he can be contacted directly, and through contact with him we can experience a whole new life of peace, love, power and wisdom? And look at Paul: he was fearless, positive, and full of hope and enthusiasm. He got negative at times, yes, but he always came out of it and carried on. And it was all this that had shaken the city of Ephesus over the last two years of Paul’s teaching and example. And it wasn’t because he was bashing away at their gods either.

I remember the first article I wrote for the local newspaper, that we Christians simply preach good news and let the Holy Spirit take it from there. We’re not into bashing people for being blind and ignorant, or giving cause at all for people to get their backs up. Like Jesus (and Paul, 1 Corinthians 10:32-33) we’re into saving, not condemning. Demetrius, however, ignored all that, because his profits had tanked from people not buying his little silver shrines of Artemis, and that’s what mattered to him. Money ruled his life.

So what could he do about it? Well, it’s now that we see **the most effective weapon of desperation that evil uses** against the influence of the Christian message. It is neurotic emotion stirred into frenzy by lies and fear mongering propaganda. It was a lie that Paul was saying “man-made gods are no gods at all,” because Paul had never even implied it, let alone said it. And the fear mongering too, when Demetrius talks of “The danger” - oh the terrible threat against their financial security - “not only that our trade will lose its good name, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be discredited, robbing her of her divine majesty throughout Asia and the whole world,” **verse 27**.

Clever stuff. Demetrius knew he couldn't get a crowd all stirred up by the silversmiths moaning about not making as much money off people as they used to. But emphasize the insult to her great motherliness, Artemis, in the eyes of "the whole world" - well, this was outrageous, because what a slap it was to her reputation and the whole city's reputation as well, right?

It was pure fear mongering and total propaganda, but it was just the trigger to set off the crowd, because in **verse 28** "they were furious and began shouting, 'Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!'" And did it ever spread quickly, because "Soon the whole city was in an uproar," **verse 29**.

And now we get to see **the madness of crowds**, and it really was madness, because if Artemis was as great as the crowd were crying out she was, she could look after herself, couldn't she? She was a goddess. So why would a goddess, supposedly commanding the respect of people "worldwide," need the support of screaming human voices to bolster up her courage to face up to insults? Couldn't she just wave her magic wand or utter a magic spell that would evaporate Paul and his companions? But why would she need to defend herself at all when she wasn't even being threatened in the first place?

But those in the crowd who'd bought into the Demetrius narrative, "seized Paul's travelling companions," and leading a wild and raging mob they all poured into the theatre, a huge place (the remains of which can still be seen today) with room for 20,000 people. Paul wanted to face the mob in person (verse 30), but again it was totally taken out of his hands (just as it was in Acts 18:14) when "some of the officials of the province, friends of Paul, begged him not to" (verse 31). Which tells us **how well thought of** Paul was, so much so that even the rulers (who had also become his friends) wanted to protect him.

Well, like any mad crowd, "The assembly was in confusion," and "most of the people didn't even know why they were there," **verse 32**. "Some were shouting one thing, some another," venting away without actually knowing what the fuss was all about, probably because they were just visiting for the Artemis festival, and didn't actually live in Ephesus. The Jews, meanwhile, afraid perhaps that they'd be blamed, volunteered Alexander to face the crowd (verse 33), "But when the crowd realized he was a Jew" (verse 34) they shouted him down for the next two hours chanting "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" Madness? It was more like a mass formation hypnosis. But finally the city clerk got them to shut up, and he advised the crowd that any grievance Demetrius and his fellow craftsmen had should be handled legally and properly in court, rather than risking "being charged with rioting" (verse 40), or inciting a riot when there were was no reason for it.

It was a touchy moment, because the madness that descends on a mob creates a knife edge where one wrong move could have sent the crowd raging through the city looting and trashing property, and probably hunting down Christians too. The city clerk, likely the Mayor, was an astute politician, however. He focused on the law, which the crowd knew was backed by the military might of Rome, and Rome didn't treat riots, or the law, lightly.

The clerk was exactly the right man for the moment, because he pulled off the impossible: he actually got a mad crowd calmed down. So was this the Holy Spirit's doing? And was it for Paul's sake too, to keep him encouraged for all the good work he'd done for the last two years, and so much so that even government officials considered him their friend and many people were deeply impressed with the Christian message.

And Paul was totally spared too; he didn't even have to open his mouth in his defence - just like in Acts 18:14 when Gallio, the Roman governor, had stepped in when Paul was faced by a mad crowd out to nail him then too. No wonder Paul said what he did in **2 Corinthians 1:10** that God had delivered him from "deadly" situations, "and he will deliver us." He had that kind of confidence, knowing now in his own life the very real power of the kingdom of God, and especially when people were praying for him (verse 11).

Yes, his life had been tough, but the Holy Spirit had stepped in, and in the most amazing and even amusing ways, to keep him encouraged. That's why Paul called the Father "the **God of all comfort**, who comforts us in all our troubles" (2 Corinthians 1:3-4). Paul wasn't just saying that; he knew it from experience. He also knew **why** God had put him through these experiences - "so that we can **comfort** those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God" (verse 4).

Which explains why, after "the uproar (in Ephesus) had ended," **Acts 20:1**, and before he said "good-bye and set out for Macedonia," Paul "sent for the disciples and **encouraged** them." These had been hairy times for them too, experiencing the fear mongering propaganda and lies stirring up a mad mob that had put **their** lives in deep danger too. And it wasn't just them that Paul encouraged either, because all along his route to Macedonia he spoke "**many words of encouragement** to the people," **verse 2**. And when the young man, Eutychus, fell three stories "and was picked up dead" after falling asleep listening to Paul in **verse 9**, it was a hug from Paul that brought the young man back to life again (verse 10), which "**greatly comforted**" them too (verse 12).

Where there is madness, then, the Spirit, thankfully, provides comfort too.