

# False God's Exposed

## Acts 19:21-41

*Main Idea: As true salvation is found in Jesus and powerfully displayed, false gods are threatened, causing an explosive reaction.*

### INTRODUCTION

This morning, we are going to continue our study of Acts by looking at the next section, Acts 19:21-41. If you are using one of the pew Bibles, you will find it on page 873.

Speaking of pew Bibles, if you don't already own a Bible, we would invite you to take a pew Bible with you. Or talk to me (or another leader) and we will happily assist you in getting a Bible that is set up well for you (the right font size, notes, etc.).

### Illustration: Worship

I would like to begin the message today, by reminding us that we were made to worship. We see this in a variety of ways, including just a simple look at our desires. We want to be part of something that is bigger than us, a greater purpose. We want to cheer for something, we want to identify with a team or hero, preferably one that is powerful and victorious!

We were made to worship! Specifically, made to worship the eternal, all-powerful, self-existent/self-sufficient, Creator of the Universe. We were created to be in relationship with Him, enjoy Him, depend on Him, and worship Him. In Him we find life and fulfillment. But humanity turned away (initially in the Garden of Eden), and we continue to turn away and direct our worship and dependence toward other things. God's word is full of His call for us to turn back to Him, to renounce false gods, to look to Him again in dependence and worship!

And that is not because he feels threatened by the false gods we worship. It is because He loves us and knows that anything we turn to, other than Him, is not worthy of our dependence or worship. They are empty, pseudo gods, unable to provide what we need, and ultimately leading to destruction.

In Isaiah 43 God says, (**Isaiah 43:10b-11**) - Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me. <sup>11</sup> I, I am the Lord, and besides me there is no savior. There is no other God; there is no one and nothing that begins to compare or compete with Him; He alone is God; He alone can save! As we look at this passage in Acts today, we will see false gods being worshiped, we will see the threat of false gods causing a reaction, and we will be reminded that salvation is only found in Jesus; no one else (and nothing else) can save; or is worthy of our worship!

### THE WORD

The passage is pretty long today (20 verses). So, I would like to begin by providing a basic outline, and then we will work our way through the text, one section at a time. Here is the outline, and our basic road map, so that you can see where we are headed...

#### Outline

- 21-22 Context
- 23-27 Demetrius (The Rabble-Rouser)
- 28-34 The Riot
- 35-41 The Town Clerk

Let's get started by looking at this first section (the context) in verses 21 and 22...

#### Context

**Acts 19:21-22** <sup>21</sup> Now after these events Paul resolved in the Spirit to pass through Macedonia and Achaia (**uh-KAY-uh**) and go to Jerusalem, saying, "After I have been there, I must also see Rome." <sup>22</sup> And having sent into Macedonia two of his helpers, Timothy and Erastus, he himself stayed in Asia for a while.

Our passage begins by saying, "Now after these events...", immediately calling us to remember what we have previously studied. So, let's take a couple minutes to review...

- Paul is on his third missionary journey.
- He was in Ephesus for over two years (19:10). Here are a few things that happened during that time...
  - Paul followed up on the ministry of Apollos, pointing to Jesus as the fulfillment of what had been taught, and as the one in whom salvation is found. The disciples receive the Holy Spirit and begin speaking in tongues and prophesying!

- Paul spent 3 months boldly speaking in the synagogue. Then withdrew, due to opposition, and continued his daily ministry in the hall of Tyrannus for two years.
- In verse 11, we read... “And God was doing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, <sup>12</sup> so that even handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched his skin were carried away to the sick, and their diseases left them, and the evil spirits came out of them.”

Though the Ephesians were looking to magic, spells, sorcery; ultimately to false gods for their security, God is revealing that the only source of real security is Jesus. As Pastor Grant highlighted last week, there were incredible displays of Jesus’ healing/freeing power through very ordinary means - Paul and work garments.

- You will remember that the sons of Sceva attempt to manipulate the name of Jesus for their gain which backfires, and they have to flee for their lives, losing their clothes in the process.
- Word gets around.
- The believers publicly burn their Ephesian scrolls, effectively cutting themselves off from seeking security in spells and sorcery - Beautifully testifying to finding true security in Jesus and moving their trust and allegiance to Him.
- Last week’s passage concludes by saying, <sup>20</sup> “So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily.”

Jesus, and His saving power is on display in Ephesus, and a revival is taking place as people see it and turn to Him!

It’s at this time that, “Paul resolved in the Spirit to pass through Macedonia and Achaia (**uh-KAY-uh**) and go to Jerusalem, saying, “After I have been there, I must also see Rome.””

This is where Paul’s sets his sights on Jerusalem and then Rome, which we will see fulfilled later in our study of Acts. Paul has an incredible heart for the spread of the gospel, which aligns with Jesus’ heart and the instruction He left with His disciples (Acts 1:8). Jesus, the Spirit, and Paul share the vision: “That Christ would be seen by all!”

Side note: We aren’t going to take time on this today, but I just want to point to Paul as an incredible example of dependence on, sensitivity to, and submission to the Holy Spirit. We see it here, and many other places in our study of Acts.

But for now, Paul and the Holy Spirit set sights on Jerusalem and Rome, with stops along the way to minister to various churches, and to collect an offering for the needs of the church in Jerusalem. In looking at other sources (like 1 Corinthians) it is likely that Timothy and Erastus are sent ahead to begin preparation for collecting the offering for the believers in Jerusalem and to deliver Paul’s letter (what we know as 1 Corinthians) to the Corinthian church (1 Corinthians 16). So that is the context.

The most important piece of this for our study today is that Jesus, and His saving power is on display in Ephesus, and a revival is taking place! That brings us to the next section: Demetrius, the rabble-rouser.

## Demetrius (rabble-rouser)

Verse 23 says, <sup>23</sup> “About that time there arose no little disturbance concerning the Way.” Luke begins his report on this incident by letting his audience know that what happened here was, “no little disturbance”. We see here and later that this was a big disturbance; a huge commotion; a riot in reaction to the Way (this blossoming group of believers).

Luke continues, <sup>24</sup> “For a man named Demetrius, a silversmith, who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought no little business to the craftsmen. <sup>25</sup> These he gathered together, with the workmen in similar trades, and said, “Men, you know that from this business we have our wealth. <sup>26</sup> 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. <sup>27</sup> 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.””

We see that “Demetrius” was “a silversmith, who made silver shrines of Artemis”. These shrines (which could also be interpreted “abode of the gods” or “temple”) were likely small silver models of the temple. They would have been purchased as objects to assist in worship - including by pilgrim worshipers who came from all over Asia and the Roman Empire to worship Artemis, in her extravagant temple just outside the city. This was a lucrative business, a thriving industry, within which Demetrius had a leadership role. He was probably the head of their association or guild. So, Demetrius gathers the craftsmen, and those who were part of similar trades, and shares his concerns.

First, he reminds them that this business is profitable; it is the source of their wealth and prosperity. Second, he identifies Paul as a threat, due to his message that “gods made with hands are not gods” and persuading many, not just in Ephesus but all over Asia, to turn to Jesus, from their worship of false gods.

I can't help but pause here and note sarcastically, the audacity of Paul to tell people that gods made with human hands are not gods! It is ludicrous to think that something made by a mere mortal (clearly without divine origin) has divine power and is worthy of our worship and trust. And yet, we do it all the time. We may not have a problem with literal wood, silver, or stone images made with human hands (as that is foreign to our cultural experience), but we so easily worship and invest our trust in the inventions of man, or in humans themselves. We will talk about that more later, but for now let's continue.

Demetrius concludes by skillfully escalating the concern, beyond the threat to his and the craftsmen's wealth, with this inflammatory closing argument, verse 27, “<sup>27</sup> 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.”

To understand the impact of this additional warning to Ephesian ears, it is helpful to know a couple of things about Artemis and the relationship between her and Ephesus. One commentator says this about Artemis, “*the goddess received her name because she made people artemeas, that is, safe and sound. This mythical daughter of Zeus and Leto was associated with health and help of various kinds and was worshipped because of ‘her lordship over supernatural powers’. ‘She was a virgin who helped women in childbirth, a huntress armed with a bow, the goddess of death.’*” (David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles, The Pillar New Testament Commentary*)

Though this was a widespread cult, with Artemis considered the mother goddess throughout the Roman Empire (TNAC), Ephesus was at the center of it, with pilgrims flocking from all over to worship at the famous temple. The worship of Artemis and her temple was Ephesus' claim to fame, and the goddess was intertwined with the identity, politics, and economics of the city.

So, while Demetrius' primary concern is simply the impact to his business and wealth, he skillfully wraps it in an existential threat to Ephesus (its goddess, its economy, its identity, its glory). His goal is to stir up an uprising against Paul, with the hope of neutralizing this threat to his lucrative business. And, as we move to the next section (The Riot) we see Demetrius was successful in stirring up a strong reaction...

## The Riot

Verse 28, “<sup>28</sup> When they heard this they were enraged and were crying out, “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” <sup>29</sup> 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.”

Demetrius, the rabble-rouser, effectively poured the gasoline and lit the match, igniting this riot in Ephesus. Paul must not have been present or immediately accessible. Instead, a couple of men who were connected with him, Gaius and Aristarchus, were found and drug into the theater. This was an incredible theater... It was an open-air structure, estimated to have held 25,000 people. By comparison, the Moda Center can hold up to 19,000 people and Providence Park (previously PGE Park) where the Portland Timbers play, holds 25,218 people. So, this theater was similar in size to stadiums we are familiar with, but a very different environment. While it was likely originally home to Greek plays, under Roman rule it also probably hosted gladiator matches, which ended with the loser required to offer his throat to the winner's blade. Or involving animals with a variety of other gruesome outcomes.

Remember, Ephesus was part of the Roman Empire. Though Rome insisted on “peace”, it was an imposed “peace”, and they did not flinch at extreme violence, so long as it did not threaten their authority. In fact, they employed extreme violence for their purposes. For example, we know that the Roman Empire used and perfected crucifixion, a shockingly, humiliating, and horrific form of punishment.

So, though the mention of “theater” may conjure up warm feelings of entertainment and leisure for us, it was not a safe place to be in this context, in the middle of a riot; especially as one who has been named as a threat to this great city and her adored goddess. Thus, we see very appropriate concern regarding Paul's desire to go to the theater... Verse 30, “<sup>30</sup> But when Paul wished to go in among the crowd, the disciples would not let him. <sup>31</sup> And even some of the Asiarchs (a'-shi-arks), who were friends of his, sent to him and were urging him not to venture into the theater.

First, the disciples would not let Paul go to the theater. Considering the intensity of this uproar, where it could lead, and these believers' love for Paul (their spiritual father), this is no surprise. What IS a surprise is that some of the Asiarchs (a'-shi-arks) also urged him not to go into the crowd. We don't know the precise role of the Asiarchs (a'-shi-arks), but it appears that they were some kind of elite dignitary with an influential role in these Hellenistic centers (like Ephesus). Some scholars believe this was a high-level civic office. Whatever the case, the reference to some of these influential elites being Paul's friends is unexpected and instructive.

As we will see again later, Paul has not set himself up in opposition to the leaders of this paganistic city. He is boldly preaching the gospel, but it would appear he is not combative and does not have an us versus them mentality. He is good friend material, even among those with whom he likely strongly disagrees. He is engaging those who will participate in conversation and debate, looking to persuade them to turn away from powerless gods to the One True God. The gospel of Jesus is the flag Paul is waving, not a flag of opposition or attack.

Is this true of us? Are we able to be friends with those with whom we disagree. Are we the kind of community members that could be friends with those in government positions, even if we strongly disagree with their positions, their religious beliefs, political party, stance on an important issue, etc.? I'm not suggesting we compromise on truth but that we follow Paul's example of boldly proclaiming the gospel AND living the gospel by extending love to everyone... even our enemies. Being friend material, even for those with whom we differ.

Let's continue by looking at what happens next in the theater... Verse 32, <sup>32</sup> 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. <sup>33</sup> 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. <sup>34</sup> 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!"

We continue to see mass confusion and chaos. The text says that most in the theater didn't even know the reason for this gathering. The ignition of this riot was so quick and explosive, that information on the cause hadn't spread effectively. But interestingly, the lack of information didn't seem to hinder people from joining the cause and jumping on the bandwagon. At this point, some in the crowd prompt a Jew named Alexander to give a defense, presumably to try provide a distinction (and create some distance) between the Jewish community and Paul (and his friends) who are the targets of this riot.

However, likely due to the perception of there being a connection between the Jewish community and this new community of believers, Alexander is not well received. The crowd is so worked up that instead of hearing what Alexander has to say, they respond with a 2-hour chant. Can you imagine? Have you ever seen anything like this? Most of us have been to events that included some excitement and shouting. You may experience some of that this afternoon as you watch the Super Bowl. But that isn't what this is... Even if you were in the stadium in Las Vegas this afternoon, you would still find time to stop screaming and eat some food. There will be moments of intense responses (hopefully cheering), but they will not be sustained for two hours! This riot was no small disturbance. It was extreme. Demetries had hit a nerve, their gods had been threatened, and the response was explosive. In the final section of this passage, we see a city official step up and effectively calm and dismiss the crowd.

### **Town Clerk**

Verse 35, <sup>35</sup> 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?"

According to one commentator, the town clerk was the chief administrative officer of the city. He presided over both the council of city magistrates and the public assembly and was the liaison officer between the city (in this case Ephesus) and Roman provincial administration. (TNAC) As he begins his speech, the town clerk assures and calms the crowd, by claiming that there is no real threat. After all, their city is the privileged temple-keeper; home to this great goddess and to the sacred stone that fell from the sky. These things are known to everyone. We don't know for sure what is being referred to by "sacred stone". It could have been referring to a belief that the image of Artemis, which stood in her temple outside of the city, was somehow itself of divine origin. However, it seems more likely that it is a reference to a meteorite, somehow related to Artemis (maybe even incorporated into her statue) and thought to have been of divine origin, due to falling from "heaven". Either way, it is a clever way to connect Artemis with Divine origins and elevate her above the statement Demetrius accuses Paul of making, that, "gods made with hands are not gods".

So, on the basis of widespread acknowledgment of the greatness of Artemis and her favored host city (Ephesus), the town clerk encourages the crowd to calm down and proceed carefully. We see this in verse 36 as the town clerk continues by saying, “<sup>36</sup>Seeing then that these things cannot be denied, you ought to be quiet and do nothing rash. <sup>37</sup>For you have brought these men here who are neither sacrilegious nor blasphemers of our goddess. <sup>38</sup>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. <sup>39</sup>But if you seek anything further, it shall be settled in the regular assembly.

Once again, I think it is instructive for us that even in this environment with blatant worship of another god and severe consequences for civil disobedience, there doesn’t appear to be a case against Paul and his friends. While it is clear that Paul is being bold with the gospel, which includes speaking out against false gods and calling people to put their faith in Jesus, he is not known for being a hater of Artemis or being in opposition to the government. Opposition in and of itself is not the flag Paul is waiving. He is pointing to and persuading toward Jesus, the one who can truly save, heal, give freedom, The only one worthy of our worship.

The town clerk directs Demetrius and the craftsmen to take any remaining complaints to the courts or the regular assembly. And then he issues a significant warning and dismisses them... Verse 40, “<sup>40</sup>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.” <sup>41</sup>And when he had said these things, he dismissed the assembly.

The Roman Empire maintained its control and imposed “peace” by quickly squashing anything that had a whiff of rebellion or revolt. A disturbance like this riot could have serious consequences for Ephesus, its leaders, and its autonomy. And so, with this sobering warning, this Ephesian official (The Town Clerk) effectively extinguishes any remaining flames of the riot and dismisses the gathering.

This is an incredible passage! It begins with a reminder of the revival that was taking place in Ephesus, and then we see a major reaction, due to false gods being threatened.

*Main Idea: As true salvation is found in Jesus and powerfully displayed, false gods are threatened, causing an explosive reaction.*

## **APPLICATION**

As we move to application, I would simply like to ask... who or what are we worshiping? Is our worship and trust directed toward the only one who is worthy; the one who can save? Remember the verses in Isaiah we looked at earlier, where God says... **Isaiah 43:10b-11** Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me. <sup>11</sup> I, I am the Lord, and besides me there is no savior.

Are we recognizing that reality? As we consider this, I have two basic application questions...

First, who are you looking to for salvation from sin and sin’s devastating consequences? Because of Adam and Eve’s turning away from God in the Garden of Eden and rejecting Him as Lord, we are born sinners, citizens of the kingdom of darkness. We need a savior! And only Jesus can save.

The powerful miracles of physical healing and freedom from demonic powers in Ephesus are illustrations that point to Jesus’ ultimate healing, freeing, and salvific power!

When we look to Jesus for salvation, we are united with Him...

- the debt we owe gets transferred to Him and paid for by His death on the cross,
- His righteousness is transferred to us and becomes our righteousness (giving us perfect standing before God),
- and His resurrection becomes our resurrection (both now as new creatures in Christ and when we will be resurrected to live with Him forever on a perfectly restored Heaven and Earth).

If you have never looked to Jesus for salvation, the invitation is yours today. All you have to do is look to Him, recognize Him as what you need, and receive Him as your Savior and King!

The second application question I would like to ask is, what false gods are our hearts worshiping or trusting in?

Even if you have already recognized your need and put your faith in Jesus for salvation, our hearts still wander. We still have a tendency to worship and depend on false gods. And our Heavenly Father lovingly calls us to turn away from what cannot satisfy and find the life we are ultimately looking for in Him.

Here are just a few false gods that come to mind that we can easily worship and invest our trust and security. (Note: It is by no means a comprehensive list and isn't in any particular order.)

- Money, wealth, financial security
- Identity and reputation
- Comfort, convenience, health
- Safety
- Possessions (houses, toys, tools, heirlooms etc.)
- People and relationships (spouse, kids, parents, mentors, influencers, politicians, etc.)
- Nation, political party
- Control
- Self

Many of these things are really good things. Many are gifts from God to be enjoyed. But they become dangerous when they begin to replace our trust in God or our worship of Him! They cannot fulfill that role; they are powerless to save. As I mentioned earlier, I think it is difficult to identify when our hearts are worshiping something or someone other than God, or when we are investing our trust and security in a false god.

One indicator that we see in our passage today, and that can also be useful in identifying false gods in our lives, is reactions, or "riots". I am thinking of things like anger; conflict; anxiety; despair. When we are experiencing these or more of these kinds of reaction/"riots", we would greatly benefit from considering the cause. It may be, that a false god is being threatened, and the reaction is revealing misplaced worship and dependence.

*Illustration: My anxiety last week as I was headed to church. And my tendency all week to get anxious about preaching today.*

Who are we worshiping? Let's keep asking that question as we encounter various "riots", various reaction in us and around us.

## **Conclusion**

As we conclude, I would like to read a portion of a devotional in Tim and Kathy Keller's book, *God's Wisdom for Navigating Life*.  
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# **False God's Exposed**

## **Acts 19:21-41**

Main Idea: *As true salvation is found in Jesus and powerfully displayed, false gods are threatened, causing an explosive reaction.*

Introduction

Context (21-22)

Demetrius (23-27)

The Riot (28-34)

The Town Clerk (35-41)

Application

## Application Questions

1. What are some qualities you see in Paul's approach to ministry in Ephesus?
2. Are there any answers to question #1 that could or should be applied to your ministry in your community?
3. In what ways are our false gods the same or different from those in Ephesus?
4. What false gods do some of your reactions (anger, anxiety, conflict, despair, etc.) point to. Can you think of any specific examples?
5. What should we do once aware of a false god we are worshiping?