

### THE BOOK OF ACTS

#### Lesson 44, Chapters 19 and 20

It is eye-opening to notice that up until the 19<sup>th</sup> chapter of Acts, actual behavioral changes of new Believers coming to faith in Yeshua has not been something we've seen. Rather Luke's focus has been about how Paul and others took the Good News to the Diaspora, the challenges they encountered along the way, what the typical objections to Yeshua as Messiah were, the locations that were evangelized, the fact that some Jews and gentiles accepted salvation, and the fact that most Jews and gentiles fought mightily against it. But to this point acceptance of Yeshua has largely been an issue of knowledge, spirit and conscience.

For the Jews this is understandable; Paul has not been suggesting changes to their Jewish lifestyles or customs. Why would he? For Paul coming to faith in Yeshua wasn't about turning from his established religion to a new one; rather it was the logical and scripturally prophesied progression of his Jewish faith. Yeshua wasn't a new and unexpected path; He was the manifestation of what had been predicted in the Tanakh for centuries. Jews had always been following God's commandments (at least in their eyes) and worshipping in ways that they believed the God of Israel deemed acceptable; they were eating according Biblical dietary laws, and forming families and practicing morality in accordance with the Torah (although in reality what they were really following was **Halakhah**: Jewish Law).

On the other hand, the first gentiles to come to faith were God-fearers, meaning they were already worshipping the God of Israel at some level, attending synagogues alongside Jews, and had a rudimentary understanding of the concept of a Messiah before they were introduced to Yeshua. In the most recent chapters of Acts that we've studied we see that even a few **pagan** gentiles have come into the fold. Yet after attending services at a synagogue, these same gentiles went home to their gentile world complete with gentile friends, family, and social associations. They practiced a gentile lifestyle while following a Hebrew religion; they had one foot in each world and they saw no conflict in that. But indeed these gentiles were asked to make behavioral changes, and we saw these changes ordained by the leadership of the Jerusalem Council back in Acts chapter 15. Most of these changes for gentiles involved food restrictions; the other changes involved abstention from idolatry and sexual immorality.

Living in foreign lands Diaspora Jews made lifestyle concessions to their gentile-dominated environment to varying degrees. Some Jews merely tried to behave in friendly ways with the gentiles so that they could live in peace, but they maintained a traditional Jewish lifestyle. Other Jews adopted most of the gentile lifestyle and became Jews in name only. The majority of Jews adopted a lifestyle of something in between these two extremes. Thus in Acts 19 we hear about a family of Jewish exorcists; these were Jews who had adopted pagan ways of dealing with demons. So what we learn is this: for the most part the Jews and gentiles who came to belief in Yeshua went right on living their lives just as they had before this new knowledge, with no substantial changes. It apparently didn't dawn on them (and it didn't seem to be particularly pushed upon them) that their newfound faith needed to be expressed

outwardly in deeds and actions, and not just thoughts and words. So what was it that caused them to see things differently and voluntarily make real, meaningful lifestyle changes?

In Acts 19 we saw two things happen that seriously impressed the local Believers of Ephesus: 1) Paul went around miraculously healing people with prayer and laying on hands; but also cloth items that Paul had merely touched were used by others to heal. 2) Paul drove out demons from victims by ordering them out in Yeshua's name. But when some Jewish sorcerers tried using Yeshua's name to exorcise a demon, it not only failed but the sorcerers were pummeled by the demon until they ran away bleeding and naked. Immediately thereafter we see Jewish and gentile Ephesians, all Believers, taking their expensive books of magic and spells out into the streets, piling them high and burning them. So the moral of the story is this: actual trust cannot exist only in the realm of speech and thought but must also result in our turning from committing sins. Coming to Christ must at some point pass from theory to application for it to be of real value in Heaven or on earth. But this maturation doesn't happen overnight; new Believers need good teaching to add depth to their understanding, they must have mentoring and be given living examples to guide them along, and they must personally step out and engage in deeds and make actual lifestyle changes to manifest their faith and make it real in them. Usually the first lifestyle changes are about letting go of something obviously sinful. Afterwards it can be about maintaining this new lifestyle in a way more in line with righteousness, love, kindness, mercy, and avoiding temptation that could draw us right back into sin if we're not careful.

Let's continue in our study of Acts 19 by starting at verse 21.

### **RE-READ ACTS CHAPTER 19:21 – end**

Acts 19 verse 21 begins with the words "some time later". This phrase is a rather standard Hebrew literary device that ends one train of thought and changes to something else. There is no sense of those words trying to quantify how much time passed; it could have been a day or two or it could have been a year or two; the context usually reveals the amount of time involved. Here it was likely a few days or maybe a few weeks at most.

We are told that Paul decided "by the Spirit" where he should go from Ephesus. I don't want to overanalyze or allegorize this short statement yet there is a simple principle presented to us that constantly trips up well-intentioned Believers. The principle is that both Paul and the Spirit had input into the decision of what comes next. Experience with God has proven to me that the life of a Believer is a co-operative venture between the Lord and His follower. He's not going to control us like the operator of a marionette does; yet we aren't entirely free agents who have no master. We are to look to God in all things; we are to pay attention and discern as much as He wishes to tell us, but then we must do it (it isn't a negotiation). As here with Paul what is received is usually a somewhat general instruction from God that doesn't give us the details of how to carry out the assignment; much is left to our discretion. I've seen so many Believers utterly paralyzed because while they have a general idea of what the Lord wants them to do, they don't think they've received a complete enough set of divine orders so they have determined to take no action until they do. I'm not sure I've ever seen a case where those hope-for detailed instructions eventually came like they did to Moses on Mt. Sinai,

because to God the process of our journey is every bit as important as the destination. But I have seen many cases where the moment eventually passed, and the opportunity God gave us to serve Him was wasted, and Believers were left frustrated and disappointed. Paul knew from the Spirit that Rome was the key destination on God's agenda; but the route and timing to get there were mostly Paul's. I'm not sure that Paul knew exactly why Rome was so important to God.

We actually get a few more details about what Paul's journey towards Rome would look like in the book of Romans and we get some other pertinent information in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians.

### **Romans 15:23-26 CJB**

***23 But now, since there is no longer a place in these regions that needs me, and since I have wanted for many years to come to you,***

***24 I hope to see you as I pass through on my way to Spain, and to have you help me travel there after I have enjoyed your company awhile.***

***25 But now I am going to Yerushalayim with aid for God's people there.***

***26 For Macedonia and Achaia thought it would be good to make some contribution to the poor among God's people in Yerushalayim.***

So we see that Paul actually wound up venturing much farther west (all the way to Spain) than he at first seems to have planned in Acts 19. And we get a hint that at least one factor in Paul's choice of route and timing of his journey had to do with collecting contributions for the poor in Jerusalem. This is interesting, so let's follow that a bit further. So in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians we learn this:

### **1 Corinthians 16:1-4 CJB**

***1 Now, in regard to the collection being made for God's people: you are to do the same as I directed the congregations in Galatia to do.***

***2 Every week, on Motza'ei-Shabbat, each of you should set some money aside, according to his resources, and save it up; so that when I come I won't have to do fundraising.***

***3 And when I arrive, I will give letters of introduction to the people you have approved, and I will send them to carry your gift to Yerushalayim.***

***4 If it seems appropriate that I go too, they will go along with me.***

So we see that collection of funds for the poor was heavily on Paul's mind during his travels. But the question then becomes this: was this simply a general gift of charity for poor Jews in Jerusalem (probably mostly Believers), or was there something else behind this? We'll discuss that a bit more when we get to Acts chapter 20.

Interestingly in verse 22 the young disciple Timothy reappears on the scene. Paul intended to first go to Macedonia so he dispatched Timothy and Erastus to Macedonia to precede his arrival. Likely this was to begin to gather the donations. We're told that Paul would stay on in Asia for awhile; this is referring to Ephesus as it was considered as perhaps the major city of Asia. But before Paul left to join Timothy and Erastus in Macedonia a most serious disturbance occurred in Ephesus that had the potential of being life threatening (but fortunately it wasn't). This disturbance involved the well-to-do business owners of the city's lucrative silversmith trade. Whereas up to now it had been Jews who were the instigators of riots and violence against Paul and others of the band of traveling disciples, here it is gentiles. And the verse makes it clear that in the eyes of the rioters the upset was directed less at individual Believers and more against certain religious principles promoted by The Way. The story begins by naming a certain individual, a Greek named Demetrius, who was likely the head of the local silversmith guild; he is the one who ignited the disturbance. And the bottom line is that this was mostly about money.

The city of Ephesus was the patron city for the goddess Artemis, and most of the works created by this guild of silversmiths were in honor of Artemis; she was the all-important fertility goddess. We have discussed in our studies of other Bible books that a fertility goddess was standard fare for generally any Mystery Babylon-based god system; it's only that her name changed from culture to culture. Her name was Artemis in Ephesus, but it was Ashteroth in the Hebrew language, Astarte in Phoenician, Ishtar in Akkadian, Eostre in Anglo-Saxon, and Easter in English. Her symbols were the same throughout: rabbits, eggs, and she was usually depicted with bared breasts not meant as something erotic, but rather as symbolic of the provider of life-giving mother's milk. But Artemis was also supposed to have had a special relationship with Ephesus as their protector and benefactor.

What is known is that her Temple and the associated Temple treasury was among the richest in the world. Her Temple structure was enormous: nearly 400 feet long and 200 feet wide; half again as big as a football field. A vast array of arts, crafts, jewelry making and other commercial ventures of every imaginable type were built around Artemis worship. So everything that was associated with worshipping Artemis had a major impact on the economy of Ephesus that extended to most of the province of Asia. To say that she was important understates her position and influence on the well being of the entire region both from a financial and a religious aspect. Naturally, Artemis made Ephesus an influential and admired city; thousands of visitors came annually to pay their respects to the fertility goddess.

Jewish literature, including the Talmud, indicates that Traditional Judaism of that era didn't spend much time or effort disputing idol worship by pagans. Rather their aim was to establish laws and regulations against idol worship for the Jewish community. So there's no evidence of wholesale denunciation of idols (publically or privately) by the Diaspora Jews where it concerns gentiles; more there's a sense of simply accepting the existence of idols and ignoring them as something that had nothing to do with Jews or Judaism. It is much like that today as to how Judaism regards Christianity. Jews generally see Christianity as a fine and acceptable religion.....for gentiles. And as long as Christians don't try to impose our ways on them, then you usually won't hear Jews saying bad things against the Church or against our faith. However, it is a foundational principle taught to Jewish children from the earliest age that Jews

must stay away from the influences of Christianity at all costs as it could steal their souls. So in ancient times the Jews had a more or less peaceful co-existence with pagans as they do in our day with Christians, while at the same time not condoning pagan or Christian practices for Jews.

So when we compare this understanding with what we read in verse 26, which says that Sha'ul was convincing many in Ephesus (gentiles certainly) that the manmade gods these silversmiths created were not gods at all, then we see that this is something that the Ephesians had not been used to contending with. The rather large Jewish community that had existed for so long in Ephesus was content with minding their own business and keeping their opinions about idols to themselves; but Paul was not inclined to be so politically correct. And Paul no doubt was the best known public face for The Way out in the Diaspora. Paul had no fear of debating and contending publically even if it was one against many. Recall that when Paul was in Athens he openly debated the veracity of their many god-idols. Surprisingly he didn't get into too much trouble there because they took it as more of an intellectual debate than a religious assault; and as it turns out two of the main groups of philosophers in Athens that Paul was debating were the Epicureans and the Stoics, neither of which had much regard for the various gods and god statues present all over their city anyway. But Ephesus was different; idols were their economic life blood and the people also had a very real devotion to Artemis.

At the meeting of the silversmith guild that he called, Demetrius says that in addition to the economic ruin upon Ephesus that these certain Jews called The Way could cause, Artemis herself could have her status and glory diminished if such talk went on unrestrained. This possibility meant a couple of things to the Ephesians: first if her glory diminished so would the glory of Ephesus, and thus an end to the steady stream of tourists. But second, the status of a god was in direct proportion to that god's perceived power. The more a god was worshipped, the more wide spread their reputation, the greater the size of their Temple and treasury, the higher up they were in the god hierarchy. The higher your god was in the god hierarchy the more they could do for you. So Ephesus saw their fate as directly tied to the fate of Artemis; and they felt that Paul and The Way endangered it all. The crowd got fired up when they heard the impassioned oratory of Demetrius and they began shouting, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" as a show of support for her honor.

The main assembly place in Ephesus was the city theatre; it was used for government and civic purposes. Now incensed the crowd rushed into the theatre dragging along with them at least two members of The Way, Gaius and Aristarchus, who had come to Ephesus from Macedonia to assist Paul. It is likely that Gaius and Aristarchus weren't so much captured as they were swept along with the irrepressible mass of humanity as it flowed into the theatre, unstoppable as a flash flood in a wadi. I was once caught in such a situation at the opening of a soccer match in Brazil; I've never felt such power imposed upon me and never experienced such helpless panic. My sole goal was simply to remain upright or I would surely have been trampled by people who wouldn't have even been aware of what was under their feet.

Paul being Paul he wanted to confront the mob in the theatre to offer a defense of his friends and of The Way, but his disciples restrained him because they rightly feared for his life. The scene is one of complete madness; everyone shouting something different, with many not

knowing any more than that their fellow Ephesians were nearly hysterical with anger. That's the way of angry mobs; rumors are spread, facts are distorted, logic and rationality flee and only the hyper-emotion of the moment prevails. This is how lynching happens. Some government officials of Asia who were friendly with Paul also strongly advised him not to go in to the theatre because the situation was out of control.

Here is where we need to pay more attention; verse 33 says that a Jew named Alexander was apparently just as much in the dark as to the actual cause of the upset as was the bulk of the crowd. Some local Jews found him, explained it to him, and he tried to make a speech to the masses to calm things down. But the moment they saw that he was a Jew, they simply upped the volume of their chant: "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" These determined people kept this up, we're told, for two solid hours.

Here's the thing: this statement about Alexander is more proof that gentiles made no distinction between The Way and other factions of Judaism. This riot was essentially an anti-Jewish backlash. From the gentile perspective The Way consisted of Jews and those loyal to this Jewish movement, just as did all the other Jews belong to one sect of Judaism or another. Jews, of course, understood that The Way had as their core belief that the founder of their movement, Yeshua of Nazareth, a Jewish man, was the Messiah; something they disagreed with. But they too didn't see The Way as anything but one of the many rival factions of their Jewish religion because in all other discernable ways they were no different in their underlying beliefs than their other Jewish brothers. The Way was seen as a Jewish religion, not as a gentile religion, by both Jews and gentiles. It is only several decades later that erroneous Church teachings spread that tried to make The Way at the time of Paul as something called "Christianity", gentile in its nature, and thus an opponent of Jewish Judaism. I realize that I've spoken to this subject rather recently and repeatedly; but until this is accepted and acted upon by Christians and Christian leadership then the social and religious context of the New Testament will remain misunderstood. Essentially my position is a retreat from the anti-Semitism that has dogged Christianity for over 18 centuries, and a call to reform some of the Church's most misguided doctrines that especially deal with our relationship with Israel, the Jewish people, and the Torah.

Finally the City Clerk was able to quiet the rabble. While the citizens of Ephesus felt just in their cause of upholding the glory of Artemis, the civic leaders knew that the Roman government would tolerate almost anything except for chaos and civil disorder; something they reacted to without mercy. That this man could quiet the crowd demonstrates that in this city of three-quarters of a million people, he was widely known and obviously respected as having authority. He speaks as a politician who diplomatically tries to show solidarity with the upset sensibilities of the crowd in order to ratchet down their emotions enough for reasoned logic and common sense to have room to operate.

Wisely he says that there is no need to dispute or question the veracity of Artemis, or that Ephesus is the home of this great goddess, and that this is the place where the sacred stone fell from the sky (which was for people of that era an indisputable sign of the holiness of this place). Of all this there is no question, he says, and it is so obvious and self-evident that who cares what some Jews think about it? The sacred stone that is spoken of is no doubt a

meteorite. These objects falling from the sky were rare enough that they mesmerized the ancient mind; but the one in Ephesus was not without precedent. There are ancient records of other sacred stones that fell from the clouds. In fact Islam today, at Mecca, has a shrine named the Kaaba that holds what is called the Black Stone. Actually it is a number of stone fragments held together in a special frame. No doubt the sacred Black Stone is a meteorite. And like the Artemis worshippers of Ephesus, Muslims consider the Black Stone as perhaps the most holy object in Islam and millions venture to Mecca each year to see it.

Thus (reasons this unnamed City Clerk), since we all agree that the Artemis cult is venerated and above reproach, and our goddess has allegedly been attacked with nothing but a few words, then it is time to chill out before this turns any uglier. He goes on to say that these men whom the crowd wants to punish have not robbed the Temple nor have they specifically done something to insult Artemis. In fact, with what little information he has at hand, these men (Jews) are innocent of any wrong doing whatsoever. This unwarranted riot, therefore, puts this city and its residents in a precarious position. And by the way, in a number of places in our story the characterization of the people as a “crowd” is but the English translation of the Greek word *ekklesia*. I hope that Greek word rings a bell; because it is the exact same word that is regularly translated in the New Testament as “Church”. So I suppose we could substitute the word Church for everywhere our story says crowd. Now, of course, we wouldn’t do that because it would mischaracterize this assembly of unruly people, wouldn’t it? But this is also what we face as Bible students when we realize that anytime in the New Testament that The Way gathers for an assembly (an *ekklesia*) Christian translators automatically insert the English word Church. So why don’t they instead insert “crowd” as they have throughout Acts chapter 19? Very simply, the intent is to mischaracterize believing Jews meeting at a Synagogue as Christians meeting for Church.

In verse 38 the City Clerk says that if the head of the silversmith guild, Demetrius, actually has a verifiable case of wrong doing against these men, then it should be handled in the right way; bring them before the town judges and let there be a legitimate and lawful trial where both sides can state their case. Reason is beginning to win out; so he continues by saying that unless this crowd disperses word is going to reach the Romans that an unlawful assembly (an unlawful *ekklesia*) has happened and they will be without excuse; the consequences of that could be truly terrible. He finished his speech and everyone left the theatre no worse for the wear. Paul and his companions no doubt went someplace to rest; severely shaken but not harmed.

Let’s get a little bit of a start on chapter 20. We’ll cover only a couple of verses today but I also want to give you a brief glimpse of where we’ll go next week.

### **READ ACTS CHAPTER 20:1 - 12**

This chapter begins with the words “after the furor died down”, of course referring to the near-death experience of Paul and a couple of his disciples at the Ephesus riot. We see in the 1<sup>st</sup> verse that Sha’ul called a meeting of his disciples in Ephesus to encourage them. There was no undoing or watering down the reality of what had happened; there was no painting a happy face on it. Without doubt the terrifying events of a few hours or days earlier took its toll on the

local Believers. If you were a Believer and had been a resident of this otherwise peaceful and progressive city, and had a long history of your family living here in harmony (perhaps for a few generations), how might you feel about your personal security and your place in the community after something like this? Would you ever be able to look at your neighbors and business associates in quite the same way again? How enthused and sure about the value or advantage of your newfound faith might you be?

Fellow worshippers, let's part today agreeing to soberly consider the ramifications of our duties and devotion as followers of Yeshua in light of where the world stands in our time, and the trajectory that it is undeniably on. Christianity is struggling to survive in many parts of Europe where at one time it was near to universal. In the USA our highest government leaders challenge the notion of our being a Christian nation, or having ever been. Our schools have by policy outlawed God. Active Christian fundamentalism is officially regarded with suspicion by Homeland Security as bordering on terrorism because of its passion and lack of tolerance towards Liberal secular ideals and Islam. Such basic human attributes as the sex God gave to us at birth has nearly overnight become something an individual can redefine or even opt out of by means of personal declaration. A number of our largest Christian institutions have decided that the Bible is no longer the last (or best) word on morality, evil, or right and wrong. I could go on, but won't. My question to you is this: in consideration of what we've been reading about in Acts that the early Believers suffered, how far are you willing to go to stick with your Biblical values, your God and to tell others of your faith in Messiah Yeshua? Are you truly prepared to gain God's approval and blessing probably in exchange for the social (perhaps even family) consequences of refusing to go with the flow of modern culture or even against the grain of a growing portion of an emerging Christianity that thinks it best to adapt and compromise with the latest trends rather than risk becoming outcasts or obsolete?

It is so much easier to address this question as theory but not practice; or as it affects others, but not ourselves. Folks, I tell you the time *is* upon us even if we'd rather not face it because it is not pleasant. It won't take a great deal more opposition before we will find ourselves (as with Paul, Gaius, Aristarchus and Alexander) in the midst of a seething population who sees us as the problem and as the enemy due to our faith. People who were our friends yesterday could come against us tomorrow. It has happened to the Jewish people countless times over the centuries because of their faith in the same God that we worship. We Believers have been warned by Our Risen Messiah that for His followers it is not a matter of if, but when. What should we do, then? We should follow Paul, Peter and James' example: strengthen our relationship with God, trust Our Messiah more than ever, and build closer ties within our Believing community. For we have the hope of hopes; joy now in living a life pleasing to Our Lord, and the assurance of a future life with Yeshua that makes whatever may come our way in our few years on earth as but a blip on the radar. We have the knowledge of changeless divine truth to back up our decisions and the presence of the Holy Spirit to help us overcome our challenges.

### **Matthew 16:24-28 CJB**

***<sup>24</sup> Then Yeshua told his talmidim, "If anyone wants to come after me, let him say 'No' to himself, take up his execution-stake, and keep following me.***



***25 For whoever wants to save his own life will destroy it, but whoever destroys his life for my sake will find it.***

***26 What good will it do someone if he gains the whole world but forfeits his life? Or, what can a person give in exchange for his life?***

***27 For the Son of Man will come in his Father's glory, with his angels; and then he will repay everyone according to his conduct.***

***28 Yes! I tell you that there are some people standing here who will not experience death until they see the Son of Man coming in his Kingdom!"***

We'll continue with Acts chapter 20 the next time we meet.