

Sermon 61, Strength Perfected in Weakness, Acts 19:21-41

Proposition: Paul brings Jesus' rule to Ephesus — and, like Jesus, is soon going to be the victim of mob violence.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, the second part of Acts 19 highlights Paul's weakness, just as the first highlighted his strength. In the first half of this chapter, Paul bestows the Holy Spirit, heals people just through his handkerchiefs, teaches every day for five hours for two years, and convinces huge numbers of people to burn their magic books. In the second half, he is silenced and sidelined; we get to hear only one sentence from him: "After that, I must also see Rome."

What happened to the mighty apostle? Luke is showing us that the Kingdom comes through apostolic power, yes — but it also comes through apostolic weakness. Paul was large and in charge. Then, like his master, he decided to go to Jerusalem, and the world fell apart. The kingdom didn't fall apart, but certainly Paul's influence seems to have crashed through the floor. He is sidelined and silenced, because he is on his way to Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets. The riot here in Ephesus is a little preview of the riot in Jerusalem in which he'll lose his freedom, the riot that will end up taking him all the way to Rome — the very destination he wants to reach after Jerusalem. Paul's success in bringing Jesus' rule to Ephesus is so great that

he ends up like his master — almost a victim of mob violence in Asia, and eventually a genuine victim in Jerusalem.

I. Paul's Spirit-Driven Ministry Plans, vv. 21-22

Luke begins the transition from success to what the world would call failure by describing Paul's ministry plans. Notice first of all that these plans are Spirit-driven. Some commentators believe that Luke is simply saying that Paul proposed in his human spirit, but that idea is frankly silly. What, I would ask, is the difference between planning to go to Jerusalem in planning in your spirit to go to Jerusalem? The answer is that there is no difference. If you think of the spirited part as the driver, the motivator, the part that makes you want to get up and go and follow through on your plans, forming a purpose is naturally something you do with your human spirit. And since Luke does not tell us anything more than we need to know, doesn't tell us anything redundant, I frankly reject the idea that the evangelist is here describing Paul's human spirit. Rather, in keeping with the portrait drawn in the rest of Luke-Acts, we are seeing Paul make a Holy Spirit-driven resolution. This is the Spirit's idea; guided by the good Spirit of God, Paul is heading back to Jerusalem. This is something the Spirit told him while he was in Ephesus, experiencing a truly triumphant ministry by the power of that same Spirit. In the Spirit— that is, united to the Holy Spirit by faith, parallel to “in Christ” which means being united to Christ by faith — Paul made ministry plans. These are likely the ministry plans he defends in 2 Cor 1, where he admits that he apparently changed his mind two or three times, not because he was flaky but because he decided that it would not be good to go to Corinth and have a huge fight with them.

Anyway, why does Luke mention that the Spirit directed this planning? Because the Kingdom spreads by the Spirit's direction. Paul was not randomly bouncing around the Med. He was led by the Spirit every step of the way.

A. Paul Imitates Jesus by Journeying to Jerusalem, v. 21

Why is this journey to Jerusalem that the Spirit led Paul to plan so significant? It's significant for the plot of the book; it's also significant because it shows Paul imitating Jesus. “As the time approached when Jesus was to be taken up into heaven, he determined to go to Jerusalem” (Luk 9:51 CEB). Why did he make this plan? Because the end of his ministry was approaching. Isn't it fascinating that Jesus went to Jerusalem in light of His ascension? He had heaven on his mind — and surely we should see something similar in Paul's Spirit-driven decision to go to Jerusalem. He is like his Master. He has an appointment with heaven, and in order to fulfill it he needs to visit Jerusalem.

B. Paul Plans to See Rome, v. 21

Now, before he gets there he wants to go back through Greece and see his churches there. And after he goes to Jerusalem, he wants to go on to Rome. Thus, Luke foreshadows that Paul will indeed reach Rome — and by putting Paul through a riot immediately after the decision is taken, shows that Paul will get to Rome by means of being unjustly accused at the center of a riot by the mob in Jerusalem.

Why did he want to go to Rome? Because he wanted to witness to Jesus at the ends of the earth. The gospel is rescuing people from Satan's kingdom, and Paul is a major part of that operation. He did not like building on another man's foundation, but he knew that the Roman church needed his input. Why? Because the Spirit told him so.

C. Paul's Team Ministers Further Afield, v. 22

But no sooner does he take this resolution to go to Jerusalem than things start to fall apart. The first hint that success is giving way to something the world would no longer recognize as success is the departure of Timothy and Erastus. His team is getting smaller, splitting up. Yes, more ministry is being done in Macedonia — but Paul is getting sidelined in Ephesus.

II. Paul Silenced and Sidelined by Rioters, vv. 23-41

That point becomes abundantly clear in the narrative of the riot. Luke makes several subpoints, which we'll talk about in a moment. But his main point is undoubtedly that Paul is silenced and sidelined by the rioters. After v. 21, we don't hear Paul speak again in this chapter. The riot is fundamentally about him, but he does not participate in it. Why? Because when you go to Jerusalem, your worldly status and success evaporates. Put another way, the kingdom comes through weakness.

A. Genuine Gospel Transformation Provokes Tremendous Enmity, vv. 24-28

Just about the time that Paul was driven by the Spirit to decide to go to Jerusalem, a giant riot broke out in Ephesus. As this persuasive speech delivered by Demetrius, union boss and skilled silversmith, makes clear, *genuine gospel transformation provokes tremendous enmity*. Luke has shown us over and over that money-worshippers fight against the kingdom. Now he shows us again. Demetrius cleverly appeals first to the pocketbooks, then to the civic pride, then to the religious convictions of his fellow-tradesmen. Obviously, he hadn't been elected union boss for nothing. But his acumen was entirely directed against the word and works of God. He had gotten the message all right; indeed, he accurately represents Paul's message, at least in its negative aspects.

Brothers and sisters, many American Christians are committed to a so-called "transformational" paradigm of how the church engages with the world. We have gotten into our heads that the church ought to be making the world better. I can think of no more vivid illustration of this than my grandfather Manthei's comment about ten years ago. I was doing pulpit supply at Cliffwood PCA, about an hour from his house. I invited him and grandma to come along and worship there.

"That church is on one of the worst streets in Augusta," he told me. "If they can't even have an impact on their own street, why on earth would I worship there?"

Brothers and sisters, I still think he had a valid point. But I also want you to recognize that transformationalism is a two-way street. If you actually start changing the world, be prepared for serious resistance. Paul was. Are you? Do you recognize that if we get to the place where the church has a meaningful impact on Gillette and we actually see significant social change, society is going to push back? Because it is. No doubt about it. Brothers and sisters, if you want to see God's kingdom come (which you do), then you better get ready for Satan's

Kingdom to throw everything it's got at us. If Zelensky wants to see Ukraine's kingdom extended to all of its historic territory, then he needs to be prepared for Russian resistance. Would we think that Satan is somehow less opposed to losing than Putin is?

B. Money-Worshippers Attack God's Kingdom, vv. 24-28

And when the Devil starts losing, he fights back. The fighting first of all takes the form of a pagan confession of faith, the shouting that "Artemis is Great!" and that "Artemis belongs to the Ephesians!" In other words, though the modern world tells us that what people believe is irrelevant, that's not quite true. If you think Artemis is great, then you think Jesus ain't so great. Notice, of course, that Demetrius does not exactly propose that the people should riot. He points out the problem caused for silversmiths by Paul's success, but doesn't say what they should do about it.

C. The Opponents of Christ Violate Civic Order, vv. 28-29

But the upshot, whether Demetrius intended this or not, is a riot. The whole city was filled with confusion; somehow, it spread to every quarter of town. Now, Ephesus was the fourth-largest city in the empire, after Rome, Alexandria, and Syrian Antioch. And it apparently knew how to riot; this is not the only ancient account of riot at Ephesus that has come down to us. But Luke's point is that the opponents of Christ violate civic order. They don't care that rioting is bad; they hate what Paul is doing to impoverish them and discredit their goddess, so they riot. They rush together into the theater, which could hold 25,000 spectators. And there they continue to riot.

D. Paul Silenced, vv. 30-31

Paul, meanwhile, is silenced. He desires to address the crowd, to preach Christ to 25,000 angry Ephesians at once. But he's not allowed to do that. The disciples tell him "No," rather like David's men telling him "You're not going out to battle any more; you're too valuable." Even the Asiarchs said "No way, Jose. Stay outta that theater!" Now, Asiarchs were elected officials, drawn from the richest part of society. It was their job to supervise pagan worship services and offer sacrifices and put on public shows out of their own pockets; naturally, they were rather popular, and presumably rather pagan. Yet even these people are well-disposed toward Paul. The old Paul triumphant we saw last week hasn't gone away — but at the same time, he is still silenced. He's not preaching the gospel; he's simply sitting tight, hiding from the mob.

E. The Opponents of Christ Indulge Babel-esque Chaos and Stupidity, vv. 32-34

The mob, meanwhile, descends into utter chaos and stupidity. Look at all the things Luke says about them.

1. They don't know why they're there.
2. They are shouting all kinds of different mutually unintelligible things
3. They see Alexander and think he has something to say
4. They shout him down before he can say it
5. They have nothing reasonable or rational to say in their defense; all they can do is shout their confession of faith over and over and over.

Babel has been reborn. There is no wisdom, no understanding, no counsel against Yahweh.

Certainly at Ephesus there wasn't. The whole city could do nothing but stupidly assert Artemis'

prominence. They weren't arguing, persuading, dialoging, and proclaiming like Paul. They were just shouting, on and on, for two hours.

F. "Undeniable" Paganism Has the Last Word, vv. 35-41

But though the city clerk restores order and dismisses the assembly by reminding them that they are in danger of getting in trouble with Rome for their ridiculous riot, this victory for the church is somewhat ambiguous. There is no assertion of gospel truth; quite the contrary, in fact. The city clerk states as "undeniable" the ridiculous idea that the image of Artemis fell from heaven and therefore is not a god made with hands such as Paul condemned. He also essentially says "Nothing is actually happening to our city. No one has blasphemed Artemis or said that she isn't great. If you have a problem, take it to court or to the next meeting of the city assembly." And that's it.

Now, there are two observations I want to make.

1. The Church Profits from the Assertion of Civic Order

Yes, the church profits from the assertion of civic order. Order is good for us; order is good for the kingdom. We are opposed to riots. Paul did not seek to create riots; it was his opponents who deployed riots as their tactic of choice.

2. Even When that Civic Order Is Founded on Heathen Premises

But as strong as we are on the no-riot thing, we have to simultaneously admit that the civic order was founded on heathen premises. The clerk did not get rid of the riot by saying "Artemis is a sick joke. Jesus is Lord!"

He got rid of the riot by saying "Everyone knows Artemis is great and you can stop shouting about it. Besides, we might get fined. Go home."

Civic order in the ancient near east, and today, is largely founded on pagan premises. We can deal with that, Luke says. We don't have to get in there and say "We won't rest until y'all are straightened out about the real foundations of civic order."

That's why the Bible never says what sort of government to have. It's more interested in individuals and in the local-global community called the church. Yes, Paul is being sidelined, but his message can still get out there. The riot does not succeed in driving him out of Ephesus, even if the last word in the riot is given to the clerk and his assertion that Artemis is doing just fine and nothing's going to change that.

III. Application

Well, what do we take away from the second half of Acts 19 and its scene of civic turbulence?

A. Kingdom Work Is Spirit-Driven

The first thing I want you to realize is that kingdom work is Spirit-driven. The Holy Spirit is the one who leads pastors and other ministry helpers to where they ought to go. He is the one who brought Jesus to Jerusalem so that He could die there for our salvation; He is the one who brought Paul to Rome so that he could "finish the course" of service the Lord had mapped out for him. And He is the one who continues to make ministry happen today. This is why prayer is such a vital part of ministry; it's how we show that we depend on the Holy Spirit.

B. The Kingdom Changes Consumption and Dents Profits

Second, the Kingdom changes consumption habits. Silver shrines of Artemis' temple used to be big business in Ephesus — until Paul taught that gods made with hands are no gods at all. Gospel proclamation might take a bite out of GDP. If you worship GDP, that's not okay. But if you worship God, you recognize that the coming of His kingdom is more important than the size of the national product. Don't worship profits like Demetrius did. Worship Jesus, even when He takes a bite out of your profits. After all, profit made by supplying things that harm people (like little idols) is not worth having!

C. The Kingdom Demands Suffering

Paul is sidelined in our passage. He is silenced. That doesn't mean that the kingdom is driven back. But it does mean that the kingdom comes through suffering. Paul suffers; he wishes to be up there telling the crowd about Jesus, and instead he's home, hiding from the mob.

The kingdom requires suffering. The reign of Christ comes through the work of His apostles but also through their suffering. Apostles suffer — and you will too.

D. The Kingdom Comes In Human Weakness

In other words, brothers and sisters, the kingdom comes in human weakness. Paul learned something as he sat at home in Ephesus, wishing to stop the riot but knowing that he couldn't. He learned this:

to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Co 12:7-10).

He learned that in weakness the strength of Christ came to him and supported him to do his work of building the Kingdom. The same goes for you — and for Jesus. It was through the weakness of dying that He began to reign. He wants the same for you. Amen.