

Is Christianity dangerous?

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[0 : 0 0] We turn now to our Bible reading for this evening, and it's Acts chapter 19, which if using one of the Vista Bibles, that's page 928.

Phil Copeland is continuing a series in these chapters towards the end of Acts, and last week we were in the first half of chapter 9 as Paul spent time in Ephesus.

And we saw then the power of the Word of God. It was able to defeat all in its path, and there was great growth in the Gospel.

You see that in chapter 19, verse 20. So the Word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily. And then our passage tonight from verse 21. Now, after these events, Paul resolved in the spirit to pass through Macedonia and Achaia and go to Jerusalem, saying, after I've 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. About that time, there arose no little disturbance concerning the way.

[1 : 1 7] 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 and similar trades and said, Man, you know that from this business we have our wealth.

And you see and hear that not only in Ephesus, but 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 a 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 whole world worship.

When they heard this, they were enraged and were crying out, Great is Artemis of the Ephesians! So the city was filled with confusion, and they rushed together into the theatre, 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 theatre.

[2 : 3 8] 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 defence to the crowd.

Well, when they recognised that he was a Jew, for about two hours, they all cried out with one voice, Great is Artemis of the Ephesians! 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 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.

If, therefore, Demetrius and the craftsmen with him have a complaint against anyone, the courts are open, and there are pro-councils. 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.

[4 : 08] Amen. This is the word of the Lord. May he bless it to us tonight. May he bless it to us tonight.

Credibility of the Christian faith. Perhaps you're here this evening, and you're actually highly sceptical of the Christian faith. But if you are, then you're not alone.

There are lots of voices in our society today declaring to us that Christianity is a very dangerous threat. A dangerous threat to society and our culture.

And so Christianity is something that must be quashed. I read a popular writer recently who called Christianity a poison. He said, And you will, I'm sure, remember Tim Farron, the former leader of the Liberal Democrats.

Remember the article he wrote about his treatment that he received for being a Christian, whilst also the leader of his political party. He said these words, If you actively hold a faith that is more than an expression of cultural identity, you are deemed to be far worse than eccentric.

[5 : 55] You are deemed to be offensive. You are dangerous. What can I just say? This attitude against Christianity is nothing new.

Because right back in ancient Roman society, around about the time when Luke wrote the book of Acts to his friend Theophilus, the exact same attitude against Christianity was alive and kicking.

Many people back then assumed that the Christian faith was dangerous. It was a real threat to society. And really that is why Luke has written this second half of Acts chapter 19.

He wants Theophilus and the church to have greater certainty concerning the credibility and the goodness of real Christianity. For a church that has real certainty will be a real missionary church.

A church that is full of people who are doing all that they can to see the momentous news about Jesus' victory over death, sin and Satan proclaimed to the very ends of the earth.

[7 : 02] So it is vitally important, friends, that we listen to Luke's historical account and let him give us the certainty that we need. This evening I would like to look at this passage under three scenes.

Scene 1, verse 21-22. Paul's resolve to reach Rome. Scene 2, verse 23-34. The people rage and riot.

And scene 3, verse 35-41. The politicians' response. Well then, scene 1. Paul's resolve to reach Rome.

Please look at verse 21. 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. See, up until this point, the apostle Paul had spent just under three years in Ephesus.

[8 : 10] And as we saw last week, the Lord used Paul's ministry mightily. And as a result of his time there, the whole city and also the whole of the province of Asia was filled with the gospel.

Just look back at verse 10. Luke tells us, All the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks. And look at verse 17.

And this became known to all the residents of Ephesus, Jews and Greeks. And fear fell upon them all. And the name of Jesus Christ was extolled. And we're told at the end of that section from last week that many people who had once lived in bondage to paganism and dark religion, evil ideology, turned away from that darkness to instead live under the light of the rule of God through his risen and ascended King, Jesus.

And as verse 20 says, The word of the Lord continued to increase mightily. But here in verse 21, we reach a really significant turning point in the book of Acts.

For Paul, prompted by the Holy Spirit, knows that he must leave. He must journey to Jerusalem and then go on further to take the gospel to Rome.

[9 : 30] You see, like Ephesus, Rome was going to be a very strategic city for the apostle. It would be a base where he could minister the message of the gospel and ensure that he could pass it on to others who would then take the gospel out of Rome to the furthest regions of the empire, to the furthest regions of the earth.

And we know from elsewhere in the Bible that Paul has really got his eyes on going to Spain, which at this time was untouched by the gospel. And you know, it's clear from what Paul says later in Acts chapter 20 that at this point, when he knows he's going to go this way, he also knows that the road ahead would be fraught with horrible suffering and struggling.

Paul knew that he was going to face opposition and rejection, even from his own people. And he may even face his own death. Paul knew that from now on, his ministry was not going to look as impressive as it had done in Ephesus.

Quite the opposite, in fact. It was going to be brutal. And he was going to look very weak indeed. But nevertheless, Paul knew that he must take the news of Jesus' victory with him.

It must be proclaimed, for it has the power to save people from eternal ruin. This message of the redeeming love of God in Christ must be shared with everyone at all costs.

[10 : 55] He must preach it, even if it means losing his life. Now you might be sitting there thinking, well, how does this scene teach me that Christianity is credible and good?

Well, it should be obvious, I think. Paul is willing to give up his own life for the benefit of others. He's willing to go on this journey of suffering and struggle so that others might hear about Christ, they might believe, and by believing, receive eternal life.

Is there anything evil in what Paul is doing here? Answer, of course not. Paul's resolve to reach Rome actually comes from a deep-seated love and concern for other human beings who are lost in sin, who are bound for ruin if they do not turn to the Lord Jesus.

Paul is about to set off actually on the same sort of sacrificial journey that the Lord Jesus had traveled before him. I just wonder if when the passage was being read out for us earlier, I wonder if it reminded you of a similar passage from Luke's first book, his gospel account.

I take it what Luke is actually doing here is deliberately showing us a parallel between what Paul experiences here in the final chapters of Acts and the experiences of the Lord Jesus in the final chapters of Luke's gospel.

[12 : 21] As you'll know, at a pivotal moment in Luke's gospel, we are told that the Lord Jesus resolved to journey to Jerusalem, knowing that he too would face horrible opposition, rejection, suffering, struggle, and even then his own death.

Jesus knew all this, like Paul did, but nevertheless, Jesus went. He resolved to journey down that road of sorrows out of a deep-seated love and compassion for lost people like us, to rescue rebels like us, to reconcile people like us to God the Father.

Jesus wasn't out to poison society. Jesus was not a dangerous threat. He was out to see sinners saved, to see human beings come to know their maker.

And you know, Paul is doing exactly the same thing here in the final chapters of Acts. Friends, Luke wants us to be certain. This is what real Christianity is all about.

It only has the good of humanity at its heart. It is credible and far from a poisonous threat. Well, that's the first scene, Paul's resolve to reach Rome.

[13 : 38] Scene two, the people rage and riot. In this long scene, from verse 23 to 34, Luke wants us to see how credible and good Christianity is by really contrasting the conduct of Paul over against the conduct of the pushers of idolatry, these worshippers of Artemis.

And we will see that real Christianity is not out to coerce or control or brainwash people or use them for money. For that's what the pushers of idolatry do.

No. Real Christianity seeks to peacefully persuade people away from damaging lies that will lead to destruction to instead worship the living God.

Just look at verse 23. We are told that around that time, around the time that Paul was about to leave Ephesus, there arose no little disturbance concerning the way, concerning the Christian faith.

Well, I think that's probably one of the biggest understatements in the Bible, isn't it? As we shall see, there arose up an enormous, intimidating, angry mob that moved on a violent rampage over the whole city.

[14 : 53] The whole thing itself, lasting for hours. But Luke wants us to be absolutely certain that it was not Paul or any other Christian who was to blame for this riot.

In fact, he tells us clearly where the origin of the disturbance came from. Please look at verse 24. For a man named Demetrius, a silversmith, who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought no little business to the craftsmen.

These he gathered together. As I'm sure you'll know, Ephesus was actually the home city of the cult religion that worshipped the goddess Artemis, sometimes referred to as Diana.

There was this, if you went back to the time, there was an enormous rock, sorry, enormous temple to the goddess in the city, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. And the temple was really constructed around an enormous rock that most commentators are certain was some sort of a meteorite that fell from space sometime previously.

The people of Ephesus believed that this rock had been a gift sent from the goddess herself and confirmed that the city was appointed the privilege of being the keeper and protector of Artemis' religion.

[16 : 08] Friends, when people don't believe in the true God, they don't believe in nothing. They believe in anything. And the Ephesians believed that Artemis was the goddess of fertility.

And one of the ways you would worship her was to go into the temple and hire out one of the temple prostitutes and practice all sorts of sexual immorality with these prostitutes.

It seems that the city of Ephesus was just as obsessed with sex as our society is today. And we're told about this man, Demetrius. He and his colleagues and his business associates, they're all part of a thriving Artemis tourist industry.

They would have had stalls outside the temple where they would have sold many silver shrines to worshippers so that they could take these shrines home and put them up in their cabinets and have a little personal quiet time with their goddess.

We're told, another understatement there, look, we're told that they made no little business from Artemis souvenirs that they made. In other words, they were minted because of this pagan idolatry.

[17 : 12] The stuff that they sold, they were raking it in. And it's clear that these craftsmen think that Christianity is a threat. And you know, they're right.

Christianity is a threat to them in a good sense. There is such a thing, friends, as a good type of threat, isn't there not? When something is harmful, it is so good when something else comes up to the harmful thing and threatens it.

Please look at verse 25. Demetrius says, Men, you know that from this business we have our wealth. And you see and hear, not only in Ephesus, but in almost all of Asia, this Paul has persuaded and turned away a great many people, saying that God's made with hands are not God's at all.

And that is real Christianity for you. It is a dangerous threat in a good sense because it will not tolerate the worship of false gods. Paul will not let human beings carry on living in bondage to darkness, living in the ignorance of the truth, believing lies.

As we heard last week, Paul really was doing what Demetrius claims he had been doing. For almost three years, peacefully persuading people that their most popular goddess is no goddess at all.

[18 : 35] Artemis, she's not going to help you because Artemis doesn't exist. Artemis worshippers are actually worshipping stuff that comes from inside the created order.

They've suppressed the truth and exchanged the truth about God for a lie. The thing that draws their awe, veneration, and their devotion is nothing more but a piece of debris that the universe has rejected.

You can just picture Paul persuading and reasoning with the crowds. He said, think, think, look at this rock. It's just a rock. How can it provide for you? How can it give you life?

No, no, no. The living God is the God of the scriptures who has revealed himself in history in the person of his Christ, the Lord Jesus. He's the one who you must turn on repentance and faith.

In the past, God overlooked such ignorance that you're displaying now. But now, he has set a day where he will judge the living and the dead and he's confirmed this by raising his appointed judge from the dead.

[19 : 39] That is what Paul would have been proclaiming in the hall of Tyrannus. Trust in the name of Jesus now as your savior before you face him as your judge on the last day.

The goddess that you turn to is nothing more than a silver ornament that's been shaped by the hands of men. Paul is being dangerous, a dangerous threat in the good sense.

And that is what Demetrius recognizes. And as the people listen to Paul and turn away from Artemis, well, that's just bad business. That's just bad for his business and for his wallet. And just notice what Demetrius doesn't do in verse 25.

Demetrius doesn't actually engage with Paul's teaching. He doesn't answer back. He doesn't strike up a reasonable defense for the existence of Artemis and why people should worship her.

He doesn't even stop to consider whether Paul is right or not. No. Such is his love for money and gain. He fails to see the great sense and logic in Paul's teaching.

[20 : 44] Do you know, I think Demetrius comes across as being utterly brainwashed and narrow-minded. Stubborn. Well, in verse 27, he and the other craftsmen, because Paul's teaching has affected their wallets and their reputation, they decide to take matters into their own hands.

And as I've said, instead of trying to peacefully engage with Paul, they whip up a violent mob full of angry Ephesians, full of rage. In verse 28 and 29, they actually march through all of the places where Paul has been proclaiming the name of Jesus.

all of the venues that Luke tells us about in the first half of Acts 19, through the city and into the lecture hall, they go back and cover that ground.

It's almost as though they're trying to take back for Artemis the territory that Paul has been trying to take for Christ. Where Paul had previously filled these areas with peaceful, persuasive, rational teaching, this mob fill it with aggressive shouting.

And the contents of their shout, look at the contents of their shout, is nothing more than a childish chant with absolutely no depth to it whatsoever. Just look at verse 28.

[21 : 57] When they heard this, they were enraged and crying out, Great is Artemis of the Ephesians! Great is Artemis of the Ephesians! Great is Artemis of the Ephesians! Great is Artemis You can imagine listening to that for two hours.

That's all they shout. Great is Artemis of the Ephesians! If I felt more bold, I would get us all to chant it for about five minutes, but I'm not going to do that. You'll be pleased to know. But there's no depth.

Where's the substance? That is all they have to say. It's childish playground stuff, isn't it? So the city is filled with confusion and they rush into the theatre together, dragging with Gaius and Aristarchus, two travel companions of Paul.

Let me just stop and ask you this question. Where in the Bible have we seen this sort of thing before? Where have we seen religious people whipping up an angry and violent mob that is confused and easily manipulated in order to bring harm upon God's servant?

Of course, the answer is in Luke 23. The chief priests and the teachers of the law whipped up an angry mob and manipulated them to cry out, crucify him, crucify him, in order to sway Pilate's decision of what to do with Christ.

[23 : 12] or later in Acts. Think about Acts 21. You can read it when you go home. You will see that the Jewish religious leaders once again use this same angry mob tactic to sway the authorities and to get Paul out of the Jerusalem temple.

It is a common tactic of the enemy of the gospel to do this sort of brainwashing and heavy coercion. So verse 29, that's what they do.

This brainwashed, angry mob that rushes violently into the theatre. They grab two of Paul's friends, two Christians, by brute force and pull them into the eye of the storm to face the pressure.

Just look at verse 30. I love this detail. Paul isn't perturbed at all by their hostility. Paul's got such confidence in the truth that he attempts to enter into the hall and address the people but he's hindered by concerned friends.

Even verse 31, friends in high places, the Asiarchs, that would be the city officials. It seems some of them have become Christians and no Paul and they don't want him to go in.

[24 : 21] So that's why he doesn't get there. He would have to try and rescue his friends to try and speak because he's brave and he would have spoken rational words but he's prevented from doing so.

Look at verse 32. It's almost comical, isn't it? All of the people in this mob are so confused. Some cry out one thing, some another.

Most of them had no idea why they were there. They were just shouting things because they'd been so manipulated and dragged along with the crowd. At one point, verse 33, the Jews send in one of their men, Alexander, to try and speak to the crowd and no doubt to try and cause further problems for Paul and his friends.

But when the mob saw that Alexander was from the Jews, they start shouting louder and louder and it goes on for a further two hours. The same mindless chant and confusion.

And again, notice, for all of their brashness and their aggressiveness, these idolaters never once calm down and soberly engage with Paul and the gospel.

[25 : 25] the only thing that they can do in response to the gospel of Jesus Christ is shout themselves hoarse. Friend, Luke wants us to see a great contrast here between the pushers of idolatry and the apostle Paul.

Which one do you think comes out better? Looking. Which one do you think looks more credible and good? Clearly, Paul and the other Christians and the pushes of idolatry look like greedy bullies who are only concerned with lining their own pockets.

Luke wants us to be certain real Christianity it is a threat in the good sense to all that is rotten and evil in society. But Luke also wants us to be certain that Christianity is not out to bully, it's not out to brainwash people or to use them for greedy self-gain.

No real Christianity is out to peacefully persuade people away from all that is harmful and shameful by using logical and persuasive teaching.

So that's scene two. The people's riot and rage. Scene three. Much shorter. The politician's response. So the mob finally settles down when the town clerk, one of the local politicians, arrives and addresses them.

[26 : 50] And what he says really vindicates Paul and his companions declaring that they have been above reproach. So verse 35 to 36 I'll paraphrase.

He says to the crowd, Men of Ephesus, calm down. Everyone in the world knows that we Ephesians are the keepers of the temple of Artemis. People all over the world know this to be true.

That reputation's not going to disappear overnight. It can't be denied. So calm down. Don't do anything rash. These men that you're opposing, these Christians, they're not a threat to society.

Actually you are in what you've done. You're a dangerous threat for rioting like this. It is bound to upset the Roman authorities. What you've done is very, very irrational.

And we may have to pay a price. And look at what he says in 37. He says to the crowd, you've brought these men here who are neither sacrilegious nor blasphemers of our goddess.

[27 : 49] In other words, he's saying these men have not broken into the temple of Artemis in a violent rage and smashed the place to pieces. No. They've been civilized and peaceful in their conduct.

Yes, they have spoken against the local gods and religions that are different to their own. But they've not once used language that was abusive or offensive. These men have been socially, politically, and legally above reproach.

Verse 38, if Demetrius and the silversmiths can produce any credible legal evidence that these men have caused criminal damage or carried out any unlawful activity, then take it to the official courts immediately.

And of course, Demetrius doesn't do anything because he has nothing on pull. The town clerk says, the rest of you go home immediately before the Romans charge us with breaching the peace.

Again, Luke wants us to be certain that real Christianity will always seek to be socially, politically, and legally above reproach.

[28 : 59] Real Christianity poses no threat to society in the wrong sense. Real Christianity will be marked by people who are civilized in their conduct. Well, our time is gone.

Let me finish by saying two things. Firstly, if you're here this evening and if you are not yet a Christian, then please know that this is what real Christianity is like.

It is not a poisonous or evil thing. It is not a threat to society. Far from it. Luke wants you to be certain that real Christianity only wants what is good for humanity.

But you know, Luke also wants you to know that the Christian faith really is a threat to you in the good sense. For it declares to you that if you do not worship Jesus as Lord, you do not worship the living God.

And if you do not worship the living God, then you will unavoidably be worshipping lesser things. things which are no gods at all will be ruling your life, drawing your awe, your veneration, things like money, stuff, sex, success, pleasure.

[30 : 11] If you do not worship the living God through Christ Jesus, then your life in this world, it will never be what it should be. And can I just say, it will not get any better for you after you die.

Luke is giving you a loving prod this evening, pleading with you, don't be like Demetrius. Don't harden yourself to the truth and ignore Paul's teaching.

Instead, be certain that all those who trust in the Lord Jesus, they will enter his kingdom. They will know the true satisfaction of knowing the living God both now and forever and ever and ever.

And life after death for all those who enter that kingdom will only get better. will only get better. Secondly, if you are here and you are a Christian, you are already part of Christ's church, then let's ensure that as a church we seek to follow the model ministry of the apostle Paul and the way he conducts himself.

Paul made the advance of the gospel his number one priority. He was willing to follow Jesus down that hard road of suffering and self-sacrifice in order to share the gospel with others so that they might believe and receive eternal life.

[31 : 31] Paul wasn't afraid to be a threat in the good sense. He did not tolerate idolatry and he was willing to peacefully persuade and persuasively call it out for what it really is.

A cruel and evil thing that ultimately will destroy people. Are you willing to be a good threat to the idolatry that surrounds you? I wonder.

Paul also went out of his way to be above reproach. He adorned the gospel in his behavior. By the way, he conducted his ministry with his dealings with others, especially those outside of the church.

He was not a threat to society in the bad sense. He sought to persuade people in a civilized and respectful manner and we must do the same today as the church of the Lord Jesus.

And friends, if we follow Paul's pattern, we can be certain that we are on the right road. We'll come back next week where we'll look further at this genuine pattern of apostolic ministry when we look at Acts 20.

[32 : 39] But let's be quiet for a moment to respond to the word of God in our own hearts and then I'll pray for us. Heavenly Father, we thank you so much for the book of Acts and that by listening to Luke's historical account, we really can have greater certainty concerning the credibility and the goodness of the way.

We praise you that you are the God who hasn't abandoned us, to worship idols forever, but rather, out of pure grace, you have opened our eyes to see the reality that things in the created order are no gods at all.

You alone are the true God and we can know you fully only through the person of your Son, Christ Jesus. help us as your people to follow the moral ministry of Paul so that we will be all the more passionate to see the gospel advance, even if that means suffering in the process.

and so that we will also be a people who will be above reproach, peacefully persuading others to turn away from idols that will only lead to destruction, to instead worship you, the living Lord.

Help us, we pray. In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[34:18]