

Derek French:

When Jesus was on earth he told his disciples, ‘In this world you will have trouble, but take heart – I have overcome the world.’ That’s found in John 16, verse 33. And a little earlier in John’s gospel, in John 15:20 he said, *‘Remember the words I spoke to you: “No servant is greater than his master.” If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also.’*

It’s not surprising, then, to discover that wherever God’s servants faithfully share his gospel message, there will be those who will oppose them. Sometimes this can simply mean they will not want anything to do with the Lord’s servant. Other times they will ridicule and mock those who proclaim Christ is the only saviour of sinners, and argue with them. On other occasions this opposition results in physical and mental persecution, physically attacking the Lord’s people, even imprisoning them, subjecting them to torture and even execution, simply because they share the love of Christ. Indeed, this rejection of the message about Jesus can display itself in a multiplicity of ways.

It’s fair to say that this is never easy for God’s people to endure and can be amongst the most difficult things to experience. And the believer will need to spend much time in prayer, seeking the Lord’s help.

It’s part of counting the cost of our discipleship to Christ and taking up our cross and following him, but it’s also an indication that we are truly the Lord’s and are doing his will. We wouldn’t be opposed if that was not the case.

Well it’s not surprising to discover Paul knew a great deal about this matter as he faced opposition again and again. And it raised its ugly head while he was in Ephesus.

We’re grateful to have the help of Gerard and Phillippa Chrispin. We’re in Acts chapter 19 again and while in this programme we’ll confine ourselves to verses 23 to 34, Phillippa will read verses 23 to 41 and then Gerard will take us through today’s section.

Phillippa Chrispin:

*‘And about that time there arose a great commotion about the Way. For a certain man named Demetrius, a silversmith, who made silver shrines of Diana, brought no small profit to the craftsmen. He called them together with the workers of similar occupation, and said: “Men, you know that we have our prosperity by this trade. Moreover you see and hear that not only at Ephesus, but throughout almost all Asia, this Paul has persuaded and turned away many people, saying that they are not gods which are made with hands. So not only is this trade of ours in danger of falling into disrepute, but also the temple of the great goddess Diana may be despised and her magnificence destroyed, whom all Asia and the world worship.”*

*‘Now when they heard this, they were full of wrath and cried out, saying, “Great is Diana of the Ephesians!” So the whole city was filled with confusion, and rushed into the theatre with one accord, having seized Gaius and Aristarchus, Macedonians, Paul’s travel companions. And when Paul wanted to go in to the people, the disciples would not allow him.*

*‘Then some of the officials of Asia, who were his friends, sent to him pleading that he would not venture into the theatre. Some therefore cried one thing and some another, for the assembly was confused, and most of them did not know why they had come together. And they drew Alexander out of the multitude, the Jews putting him forward. And Alexander motioned with his hand, and wanted to make his defence to the people. But when they found out that he was a Jew, all with one voice cried out for about two hours, “Great is Diana of the Ephesians!”*

*‘And when the city clerk had quieted the crowd, he said: “Men of Ephesus, what man is there who does not know that the city of the Ephesians is temple guardian of the great goddess Diana, and of the image which fell down from Zeus? Therefore, since these things cannot be denied, you ought to be quiet and do nothing rashly. For you have brought these men here who are neither robbers of temples nor blasphemers of your goddess. Therefore, if Demetrius and his fellow craftsmen have a case against anyone, the courts are open and there are proconsuls. Let them bring charges against one another. But if you have any other inquiry to make, it shall be determined in the lawful assembly. For we are in danger of being called in question for today’s uproar, there being no reason which we may give to account for this disorderly gathering.” And when he had said these things, he dismissed the assembly.’*

Gerard Chrispin:

Paul, for now, stays in Ephesus. He witnesses effectively to ‘many people’ there and in the surrounding region. He persuades them to forsake idolatry and trust and follow the Lord Jesus Christ.

As God the Holy Spirit honours Christ's gospel and Paul's witness, a 'great commotion about the Way' arises. Elsewhere in Acts, the witnessing Christian church is known as 'the Way.' That name suggests two main thoughts. First, it exists because sinful people turn for forgiveness and eternal life to the Lord Jesus Christ, who is 'the way' as well as being 'the truth and the life.' Second, the lives of these newly born again people demonstrate an amazingly changed and blessed way of living.

Demetrius, a silversmith, gathers fellow craftsmen and workers from other similar trades. This causes a big 'commotion'. Their work majors on making idolatrous shrines of the Ephesian love goddess, Diana (also known as Artemis). Demetrius is quite open that their profits come from working to promote such idolatrous worship. It is not hard to see how the conflict troubling the gathering crowd arises. Paul is sharing the gospel of Christ. That demands repentance from sin and obedient trust in Jesus as Lord. This message obviously causes people who respond to Christ to renounce sin. The second of God's Ten Commandments is to have no idols. Idolatry always was, and still is a sin against God to be repented of.

Demetrius no doubt quotes Paul correctly in saying that what the craftsmen make 'are not gods which are made with hands'. Paul knows that God's word is very outspoken indeed against both the sin and the stupidity of idolatry. Psalm 135 states clearly, *'The idols of the nations are silver and gold, The work of men's hands. They have mouths but they do not speak; Eyes they have, but they do not see; They have ears, but they do not hear; Nor is there any breath in their mouths.'* The Psalmist goes on to criticise those who worship idols; *'Those who make them are like them; So is everyone who trusts in them.'* God detests idols and will judge idol worshippers.

The real objection of Demetrius and company is not religious, but financial. Although their high-sounding praise for Diana will mask that real objection, the root cause for their anger against Paul and his gospel is lost profits for Demetrius, not lost praise for Diana. The craftsmen conclude that Paul's evangelistic effectiveness, in turning many from Diana worship to the living God through faith in Christ crucified and risen again, might bring their ungodly trade into disrepute. They even fear that the gospel might destroy Diana worship in Ephesus, in Asia, and wider still. They know that its liberating effects in combating idolatry will hit their pockets, purses, pay packets and prosperity.

Realising that their real idol – money – would be hit by the gospel, these men are furious and now start a mass rally to shout Diana's praises. They cry out 'Great is Diana of the Ephesians.' They soon will repeat this mindlessly for two hours.

The ensuing confusing commotion engulfs the whole city. The crowd seizes Paul's Macedonian travelling companions, Gaius and Aristarchus, and rush into the theatre (probably an amphitheatre). Paul's holy boldness motivates him to want to enter that hostile environment to witness. Happily for him, first the disciples prevent him, and then friends of his among the Asian officials send messages begging him to stay out of the theatre.

Does not Paul's brave dedication to preaching the gospel, even at the risk of personal physical harm and even death, challenge Christians today to serve God sacrificially and devotedly in gospel work?

As the chaos develops, the crowd's existing confusion worsens. They do not even know why they are gathered! Loud shouting comes from different quarters, voicing different things. Mob rule can be very frightening.

The Jews put forward a fellow Jew named Alexander, apparently as their spokesman to try to dissociate them from Paul and his fellow workers for Christ in the crowd's eyes. Alexander is then drawn out of the crowd and motions to it, wanting to make some kind of defence speech for the Jews. However, most people seem to have no idea about who is being attacked or why! When the crowd learn that he is Jewish, their two-hour mantra rolls on: 'Great is Diana of the Ephesians'.

Happenings like this should remind us not to follow the crowd. Let others have their prejudices and preferences in order to be in with the crowd. Each person who knows Jesus as Lord and Saviour must walk with Him each day guided by the principles of God's Word, the Bible. God, the Holy Spirit, will bring conviction based on His Word, which leads to an overriding desire to please God rather than men and women.

The crowd is very often wrong. It was the crowd that had Christ crucified. Jesus said to those who would know and follow Him, *'Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it.'* The broad way has ample room for the crowd and their many opinions, beliefs, practices and sins. The narrow way is for those who trust and follow only Jesus. But they are the ones with an eternal home in Heaven, not judgement to face in Hell forever.