

Acts 19.²³⁻⁴¹ 'Nationalism'

Background

Paul stayed longer in Ephesus than he did in any other city, initially (for the first 3 months) ministering God's Word in the synagogue, and thereafter engaging in what was effectively an intense, daily programme of discipleship, for a good two years.

Through the powerful work of the Holy Spirit people were converted, and, taught from the Scriptures, they began to live markedly different new lives in Christ. The eager commitment of their lives to Jesus and the radical nature of their new way of living, impacted the economy of the city, and eventually provoked the 'riot', which Luke describes in some detail.

The narrative shows how sin tends regularly to manifest itself 'when the good gets in the way of the best': and in particular, in the context of Ephesus, what happens when 'nationalism' (in terms of the 'nation state' of Ephesus) becomes distorted.

This is a sensitive area! So be clear in your thinking about two important points from the outset.

First, although the term 'nationalism' obviously has political associations, this study is emphatically about some important and very basic *spiritual* issues rather than any politics: failure to see that will result in some fruitless, and needlessly contentious discussion.

Secondly, 'nationalism' as such is not wrong. Anything but. The Scriptures are clear about this, from the careful and extensive tabulating of 'the nations' in [Gen.10](#), through the clear statement that God 'made all the nations' ([Acts 17.26](#)), to the final bringing of 'the glory and honour of the nations' into the 'Holy City' ([Rev.21.26](#)): and you see expressions of this, for instance, in Paul's loyalty to and love for his own people (see [Rom.9.3](#) –and that's by no means an isolated instance, of course).

What emerged in Ephesus was, however, a distortion of such 'nationalism'; when a love for the 'nation' is separated from a love for the Lord who made the nation; when a rightful gratitude for the 'nation' is replaced by an unhealthy pride in and arrogance about the 'nation'; and when the 'nation' assumes a significance and is given a precedence over every other consideration – then it's become an idolatry.

The temple of Artemis was one of the 'Seven Wonders of the ancient world' and functioned not only as a religious site but as an institution similar to a bank: the temple (and all that it stood for) was therefore integral in a number of ways to the economy of the city and region. The impact of the gospel in Ephesus ([Acts 19.1-20](#)) was seen as a threat by those whose material wealth was invested in the cult of Artemis: they refused the claims of the gospel and resorted to the use of a powerful 'mantra' ("*Great is Artemis of the Ephesians*"), and as part of that, the not-so-subtle appeal to an idolatrous 'nationalism' ('this is what it means to be truly an Ephesian') designed to beguile the populace as a whole into an hostility towards the gospel.

Although there'll be benefit in reading the whole chapter (19.1-41), 'days' (4), (5) and (6) are probably the key 'days' on which to focus, hence the additional questions.

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1) Monday 13th June – lacking

Read [Acts 19.1-7](#)

“.. we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit ..” (Acts 19.2)

The gospel spread remarkably – but sometimes it was spread quite ‘thinly’, at least in regard to what new believers were taught. Paul spotted straight away that the vibrancy and clarity of the Holy Spirit’s ministry was absent in these ‘disciples’.

What observable difference does the Lord’s gift of His Spirit make in the way you live your life?

What had been lacking in the way they gospel had been presented to them?

Prayer: *Make me always a good learner from You, Lord. May I see You more clearly, love You more dearly and follow You more nearly* [Richard of Chichester]

2) Tuesday 14th June – mind

Read [Acts 19.8-10](#)

“.. Paul .. argued persuasively about the kingdom of God ..” (Acts 19.8)

The Holy Spirit’s work of transforming believers is effected through the renewal of their minds ([Rom.12.2](#)). The ministry of the Word must be central in all Christian ministry, both in weekly worship (v.8) and long-term discipleship (vv.9f).

How careful are you to ensure that you are regularly exposed to the clear and thorough teaching of the Word of God?

In what ways does the Bible teaching you receive have a ‘spill-over’ effect in the lives of others (see [v.10](#))?

Prayer: *Thank You, Lord, for those who faithfully teach me the Scriptures. Help me also to handle Your Word well and be able to argue persuasively about Your kingdom.*

3) Wednesday 15th June – Jesus

Read [Acts 19.11-20](#)

“.. the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power ..” (Acts 19.20)

The ‘extraordinary miracles’ which God did through Paul in Ephesus were a visible way in which not only was the apostle’s ministry authenticated but the name of Jesus was held in high honour. Jesus must always ‘increase’, His servants always ‘decrease’*.

The steps taken by believers in Ephesus to honour the name of Jesus were striking: in what ways do you hold the name of Jesus in high honour?

Is your honouring of Jesus such that others can't help but take notice?

Prayer: *Keep me, Lord, from a life of bland mediocrity. Instil in me instead a joyful and whole-hearted love for Yourself through which others will also long to know You.*

4) Thursday 16th June – threat

Read [Acts 19.23-27](#)

“.. gods made by human gods are no gods at all ..” (Acts 19.26)

In the exclusive claims it makes about Jesus, the gospel transforms both the priorities and practices of believers. In Ephesus there were other ‘gods’, for which the city was famed – and on which the economy of the city thrived. Jesus was a threat!

What might Paul observe as the ‘man-made gods (that) are no gods at all’ in our society today?

Suppressing the truth results in those who put themselves forward as wise becoming in truth fools (see [Rom.1.18-23](#)): what contemporary illustrations of this can you recognise?

Why and in what ways will those who follow Jesus invariably be a threat to the surrounding culture?

How many lies or ‘non-sequiturs’ can you spot in vv.25-28?

Prayer: *Help me, Lord, to fear and reverence only You: help me day by day wisely, boldly and graciously to challenge all that is effectively idolatry.*

5) Friday 17th June – mantras

Read [Acts 19.28-31](#)

“.. soon the whole city was in an uproar ..” (Acts 19.29)

Those who are ‘media-savvy’ know well how best to peddle the agenda which they’re keen to foist upon an unsuspecting, often rather credulous society: ‘mantras’ are created, which become by repetition a ‘truth’ against which none dare ever argue.

‘Demetrius’ is alive and well today in our land! Who would you say were the ‘Demetrius’ people in our contemporary society!

What are the ‘mantras’ which are being peddled in our own society today?

How have they become the ‘absolutes’ which may not ever be questioned?

Why did the concern to be a 'world leader' in the cult of Artemis (see v.27) result in such heated opposition to the gospel? And what parallels with that can be recognised in the 'nationalisms' of the world today?

Prayer: *You have called me to love You, Lord, with all my mind, as well as with all my heart and strength. Help me daily not only to guard my heart but to think clearly.*

6) Saturday 18th June – mindless

Read [Acts 19.28-34](#)

".. most of the crowd did not even know why they were there .." (Acts 19.32)

A mindless confusion becomes the hallmark of a society which has lost the plot (see [Gen.11.1-9](#)): such a society resorts to an incessant repetition of memorable but meaningless sound-bites, the noise of which drowns out any reasoned argument!

What similarities do you see between the scenario narrated in these verses and our own society today?

What are the issues on which there is so much confusion today?

How does 'mob-rule' work? And how do intelligent people end up supporting views which they can neither explain nor, sometimes, even understand?

Are there occasions when it's wiser for the church not to get involved?

Prayer: *Lord, for our land in this our generation, spirits oppressed by pleasure, wealth and care: for young and old, for commonwealth and nation, please hear my prayer.*

7) Sunday 19th June – government

Read [Acts 19.35-41](#)

".. you ought to calm down and not do anything rash .." (Acts 19.36)

'Governing authorities' (see [Rom.13.1-7](#)) are established by God to ensure good order instead of anarchy and chaos. Resorting to courts of law is, viewed thus, a looking to the Lord Himself. A reminder to pray for those who make, and adjudicate on, laws.

Do you know who your local councillors are?

How do you know whether to appeal to the courts, as Paul later [did](#), or, like Jesus, to entrust yourself to 'Him who judges justly' ([1 Pet.2.23](#))?

Prayer: *The government is on Your shoulders, Lord Jesus. Help our leaders to submit to Your authority, to seek Your wisdom, to reflect Your justice, and to pursue Your glory.*