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18510 Branders Bridge Rd., Colonial Heights, VA 23834  
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## Acts 19:23-41 “Why People Oppose Christianity”

Intro. There are those who believe that the theme of the book of Acts is “The Unhindered Progress of the Gospel.” That theme is found in the last words of the book of Acts, “No man forbidding him.” That is the picture we see of the advance of the gospel in the book of Acts, including this text of Scripture. If Christianity is indeed true, we would expect the good news to spread powerfully, even in the face of opposition. That has been the history of the Christian movement.

In our text of Scripture today, Christianity is opposed by craftsmen of the goddess Diana, also known by the Greek name Artemis.<sup>1</sup> They incited much of the unsaved population of Ephesus against Paul and his missionary associates. But their efforts are only remembered on the pages of Scripture. Nothing really came of their attempts, and the goddess they worshipped and praised has faded into insignificance.

I believe that the devil himself testifies to the truth of the Bible because he hates Christianity and has persecuted it like no other religion. Christianity is violently opposed by some Muslims. It is ridiculed by many within higher education in our own country. For the most part the entertainment industry opposes the Christian faith. Anti-Christian activists hurl smears like “bigot” and “hater” at Americans who hold traditional beliefs about marriage and accuse anti-abortion Christians of waging a supposed “war on women.” Student groups like InterVarsity have been kicked off campuses. The fire chief in Atlanta was fired for self-publishing a book defending Christian moral teaching. Thankfully, the courts reversed such religious intolerance.

According to the book of Revelation, some of God’s people will face worldwide opposition and persecution in the last days. But Revelation 12:11 says, “And they overcame him (the devil) by the blood of the lamb, and by the word of their testimony; and they loved not their lives unto death.” How can you explain such fearless victory if Christianity is not true?

I want us to learn some things about opposition to the Christian message from this passage in Acts. You can be sure that our Christian message and our moral principles will face opposition to an even greater degree in the years to come. I want to show you why that is the case, and what we must do to have victory over opposition. Now let’s see from our text first of all:

### I. THE REASONS FOR OPPOSITION

Why is it that Christianity is opposed by people? It is not because there is something wrong with Jesus Christ. Even Pilate said of Jesus Christ, “I find no fault in Him.” It is not because our Christian faith is not true. There is strong eye-witness testimony for the Christian faith. Instead, there are other reasons. For example, false religious leaders persecute Christians, for the Christian faith is a rebuke to their false religion. Our text today is an example of people using false religion as a basis of opposing the Christian faith. Some people oppose Christianity because they have sin in their lives and they don’t want to give it up. So here in our text we are going to see some similar reasons which resulted in an uproar against Paul and other believers.

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<sup>1</sup> Luke seems to have omitted the battle with what Paul calls “wild beasts” (1 Cor. 15:32) as well as the hardships that caused him to despair “even of life” (2 Cor. 1:8-10). – Fernando.

But first, let me give you a little background to the situation we see here. As v.35 indicates, most everyone in the Roman world knew that the city of Ephesus was the center of the worship of the goddess Diana. In the last of that verse we read of their belief that the chief god Jupiter or Zeus sent an image of the goddess to the city. Actually, it was probably a meteorite in which the resemblance of a many-breasted female was discerned. And so it became worshiped as a fertility goddess. The temple of Diana was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. It was also the largest Greek temple ever built. It was 450 ft long and 225 ft wide and 60 ft high, with 127 columns. So it is not surprising that the city attracted many pilgrims and sight seers, who would purchase small replicas of the temple, which likely contained an small idol of Diana.

But an uproar occurred, apparently over certain outsiders who were charged with opposing their goddess. But let's examine what *really* was behind the uproar. First and foremost was:

A. Loss of Profit (cf. 16:19) - The trade of the city flourished upon the worship of Diana. These silver smiths sold silver shrines which were probably small models of the temple. The models probably contained an image of the goddess Diana. Demetrius, who must have been the president of the guild of silversmiths, called together the other silversmiths to address the issue stated in v.24, that these silver shrines of Diana, "brought no small profit to the craftsmen." The sale of these small shrines was a source of considerable profit to the silversmiths and I'm sure the trade employed a good number of people. Notice what he said in v.26, "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." The opponents of Paul were well aware of the tremendous power and success of the Gospel. Since Christianity was becoming rather widespread, it was cutting down on business even from pilgrims. They were alarmed at the fall in the sale of them which the spread of Christianity was causing. They were afraid that if they did not do something soon, they would continue to lose money.

You know, people are very quick to take alarm when their financial livelihood is threatened. There are many trades which would be wiped out if Christ's laws of life were universally adopted. A liquor-seller, for instance, is not likely to look complacently on a religion which would bring his trade into disrepute. In fact, during the Welsh Revival it was reported that scores of taverns went out of business for lack of customers! Back around 1890 there was a strong prohibition movement, and my great grandfather Joe Felker worked to pass laws in the Georgia legislature that effectively ran the bar owners out of his home town of Monroe, GA and elsewhere. In fact, one of those bar owners was a cousin named Frank Felker. That was only possible because of a religious revival that had taken place. Oh, how I wish we could put the liquor and drug dealers out of business today! How I wish we could see the pornographers and Pimps go out of business! Oh that enough would turn to Christ so that the abortion providers go out of business!

Now we can understand why people oppose Christianity when it seems to threaten their business, but is it wise to put profit over people's spiritual wellbeing? Of course not! Jesus said in Mt. 16:26, "What would it profit a man if he gained the whole world, and lose his soul?..." Though we can sympathize with those who lost income or lost their jobs because of a cutback in the trade of idols, they should realize that their spiritual well-being is far more important than their financial well-being. If you take care of people's spiritual well-being, God will take care of their physical well-being. Jesus said, "But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you" (Mt. 6:33). When you put monetary concerns above spiritual concerns, you are in trouble.

Even though their primary motivation for opposing Christianity was financial, our text reveals another reason for the persecution of Christians:

B. Dethronement of their Own Religion – In v.27 Demetrius said, “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.” He cleverly moved from the economic to the religious sphere, from the appeal to the pocketbook to an appeal to local pride in Artemis and her magnificent temple. They argued that not only was their livelihood at stake; the majesty of the goddess Artemis, indeed the validity of their entire religion, was being challenged. It is amazing how religious these craftsmen became when it suited their economic interests!

The speech is a perfect example of how self-interest masquerades in the garb of pure concern for lofty objects. The danger to “our craft” comes first, and the danger to the “magnificence” of the goddess second.

Too often businessmen join a large, prominent church just to gain respect and more business. Or a politician will go to church only while he’s running for office. They will talk of God and morality even when their political positions are contrary to Scripture!

Next, let us see together not only the reasons for the opposition but also:

## II. THE NATURE OF THIS OPPOSITION

This brief speech by Demetrius was enough to ignite the flames of a mob spirit. To the mob it seemed intolerable that they should idly stand by and allow such an affront to be offered to the goddess and her temple, which they viewed as the most magnificent temple on earth. But notice how the common characteristics of opposition to Christianity are illustrated here:

A. Opposition May Be Ignorant - In mass confusion the crowds rushed into the theater, as we see in v.29. The theatre was an open-air theater carved out of a side of a mountain. It could seat 24,000 or more. That’s larger than any stadium in the Richmond area. As v.32 indicates, most didn’t even know what the ruckus was about. Many came just to see what the excitement was about. The people were just following the crowd and joined in on the shouting that was begun by the silver smiths. [Here we see Luke’s sense of humor].

We need to be careful about following the crowd and jumping to conclusions before you even know the facts.

B. Opposition May Be Emotional – We read in v.28, “Now when they heard this, they were full of wrath and cried out, saying, ‘Great is Diana of the Ephesians!’” A crowd of people can really get worked up into emotion. People can get in heated arguments over religion, money or politics! These are prominent topics on social media. Now in this case, their emotional cry could be translated, “Great [is] Artemis of the Ephesians!” Again in v.34 we see the great emotion that was stirred up. After a spokesman for the Jews tried to address the crowd, they shouted these words for two hours! The chant must have been heard all over Ephesus.

You may find that people who oppose Christianity can get quite emotional. In Islamic countries a crowd can really get worked up to attack the so-called infidels. Do you remember when Muslim crowds got really worked up over a few political cartoons about Muhammad? What’s

amazing is they just proved the point of the cartoon by their reactions! Think of how emotional people can become when they feel their so-called abortion rights are threatened.

If you ever deal with someone who has become very emotional, you need to understand that the more emotional they are, the less reasonable they are. Wait until emotions have cooled before you try to reason with them. And so, notice another truth about those who oppose us:

C. Opposition May Be Unpersuadable – We see in v.33 that the Jews of Ephesus called on Alexander to step out and make clear to the throng that they, in contrast to Paul and his Christian friends, were not the occasion for the trouble. These Jews were businessmen, and they didn't want the people mad at them. But in v.34 we read, "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!'" Since Jews were also monotheists, and did not worship Diana, the people of Ephesus were not even willing to listen to what they had to say. They just shouted him down for two hours! They were the type of people who say, "Don't confuse me with facts. My mind is made up."

Isn't it strange the way so many who reject and oppose Christianity have never even read the Bible? And when you try to persuade them to believe in Christ, they simply refuse to be persuaded. Many will not even listen. How sad!

So don't be surprised if some people won't even listen to what you have to say if you try to witness of your faith. So if people refuse to listen to your witness for Jesus Christ, then do what Jesus instructed in Mt. 10:14, "And whoever will not receive you nor hear your words, when you depart from that house or city, shake off the dust from your feet." Just move on to people who are willing to listen.

Finally, let's see from our text:

### III. HOW TO HAVE VICTORY OVER OPPOSITION

Can you imagine what it must have felt like to have up to 24,000 people against you? I have bad news for you. Most people in our world are not Christians, and some are quite hostile to the Gospel message. And even in this country true Christians are certainly not in a majority. But we should never allow opposition, or the fact that we are in a minority sway us from being faithful to Christ. We should continue to be the salt of the earth even though salt can burn and irritate a wound. But in the parable of the sower, Jesus describes a certain type of person who seems to be glad to have become a Christian. But when persecution comes, they fall away. Would that be true of you? Will you be defeated by opposition or a victor over opposition to our Christian faith?

I want to show you how you can have victory over those who would oppose your faith in Christ. First of all:

A. Don't Needlessly Incite Opposition - If we are persecuted, their opposition should be groundless as it was with Paul. Paul and his helpers were tactful. The clerk of the city spoke up for Paul and his missionary associates. Notice what he said about them in v.37, "For you have brought these men here who are neither robbers of temples nor blasphemers of your goddess." They had avoided poking fun at the tradition of the image falling from heaven. Instead, Paul and his fellow missionaries probably majored on the positive truths of the gospel. To attack idolatry among people who cherish their gods and know nothing better, since they have not yet received the Gospel, is to

leave them in a vacuum. Nor did they rob the pagan temples. Some Jews in their zeal would tear up and rob temples, perhaps to show that the idols were not real.<sup>2</sup>

We need to be careful about public attacks against other religions, especially when we are on their own turf, so to speak. For example, if you travel to a Muslim country, or if you are in a Muslim community or home right here in America, don't go around preaching inflammatory rhetoric, such as Muhammad was a pedophile. Let us just share the Gospel among those who are willing to listen. Then, when the time is right, we can show the flaws in their belief system. But don't alienate people before we even have a chance to share the gospel with them. Some Christians bring persecution on themselves by their rash and unwise public statements. Jesus said in Mt. 10:16, "Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves." Peter said in 1 Peter 3:15 that we are to "always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness ...."

B. Do Not Fear but Have Courage –Notice in v.29 that the mob “seized Gaius and Aristarchus, Macedonians, Paul’s travel companions....” Paul was not one to abandon his colleagues in such a crisis. So according to v.30, he was willing to go out and speak to the crowd. What courage! Paul was willing to face men who were more ferocious than a cage full of lions! Why was that? Proverbs says, “The righteous are as bold as a lion.” Paul had no fear due to his complete faith in God. Only recently Jesus had appeared in Paul in a night vision saying, “Do not be afraid, but speak, and do not keep silent” (Acts 18:9). Paul had faced even violent opposition several times before, so he was not afraid even to face this large crowd! The noblest kind of courage is not that born of flesh or the madness of battle, but that which springs from calm trust in Christ. But as we see in vv.30-31, he was restrained by the disciples and some of the prominent citizens of the city. In fact, they were literally called Asiarchs, high government officials of that large city. We cannot know for sure if they did the right thing, but my point is that Paul exemplified courage in the face of opposition.

Young people and adults, it doesn't take much courage to be like everyone else. It's easy to just flow with the crowd and do what everyone else is doing. But it takes courage to be a *good* Christian. Are you going to allow Satan to have victory over you through intimidation? Or are you going to have victory over Satan through the courage of faith? [Look up other verses dealing with courage].

C. Avail Ourselves of Government Protection – Paul befriended some of the high government officials in Ephesus, and they protected him, as I have already pointed out in v.31. Perhaps they also persuaded the city clerk to address the mob, who spoke of Paul and his associates in friendly terms. Knowing the danger of an emotional mob, he was able to persuade the crowd not to do anything against the Christians, but to take up any grievances in court (v.38).

There are non-Christian judges who are reasonable and who abide by the law. In times of difficulty we can appeal to such for protection under the law. Such protection may be necessary for Christian activity to go on. The example of Paul also shows the value to establishing relationships with the leaders of a community. After all, they need Christ as much as anyone else. Like Joseph, Nehemiah, Esther, and Mordecai, we should use any esteem we have won with political leaders to grant protection for God's people. God can certainly providentially work through such leaders.

Finally, we should:

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<sup>2</sup> But the common people feared doing anything against the temple, for they believed the gods existed and the gods would get them back. That being the case, the banks would be located inside the temple complex.

D. Trust in the Promise of Victory - As we look around our country and this world, it may look like we are losing the spiritual battle. Many churches are closing or have declined in attendance significantly. But our ultimate victory is promised by the Word of God. Romans 16:20 says, “And the God of peace will crush Satan under your feet shortly.” In Revelation 12:11 we read about God’s people in the last days who will overcome Satan by the blood of the lamb, and by the word of their testimony. Someday we are going to share in the great victory celebration of Jesus Christ over this wicked world, when He comes as King of kings, and Lord of lords.

When Lord Nelson reported to the British admiralty his great victory over the French fleet in the Battle of the Nile, he said that “victory” was not a large enough word to describe what had taken place. Even so, when Paul spoke of the victory which he had won through Jesus Christ over all the adversaries and temptations and woes of life, “conqueror” was not sufficient to describe such victory; and therefore he said in Romans 8:37 that “we are more than conquerors, through him that loved us.”<sup>3</sup> Literally, we are “super-conquerors.” No matter how bad it gets in this world for believers, let us claim this promise by faith.

Conclusion: So victory is ours in Jesus Christ. Will you make a commitment to stay in the battle, and not give up? Will you stay true to Jesus Christ in spite of the opposition from both the religious and secular communities? Ultimate victory is assured. Let us trust God to make us more than conquerors through Him who loved us.

Sources: F.F. Bruce, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Book of the Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1954); H. Leo Eddleman, *An Exegetical and Practical Commentary on Acts* (Dallas: Books of Life Publishers, 1974); Ajith Fernando, *The NIV Application Commentary: Acts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998); Everett F. Harrison, *Acts: The Expanding Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1975); H.A. Ironside, *Lectures on the Book of Acts* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers 1943); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, Vol. 11 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977 reprint); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 4 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1983); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 5:30] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2017); Curtis Vaughan, *Acts: A Study Guide Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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<sup>3</sup> C.E. Macartney in Paul Lee Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations: #2055* (Rockville, Maryland: Assurance Publishers, 1979), page 520.