

Last week in Acts for the summer. Leaving it at the start of Paul's third, and last, missionary journey.

What do we learn from voices of the past?

During the gold rush and western migration in America, boom towns popped up everywhere along the routes to California and other western destinations. These towns buzzed with excitement and anticipation of great things to come. Today, many of them are ghost towns, completely abandoned...now a historical curiosity. If you ever visited one of these towns you can almost hear voices and activity all around you. You can imagine the sounds of life in the 19th century. Horses and carriages, people discussing a price for clothing or food. Laughter of small children who are just excited to be there. These sounds fill our imagination of what used to be and causes us to wonder what happened. Some people even like to try and recreate the experience!

Today, we are going to travel to a ghost town called Ephesus. When we get there we can see nothing but a muddy marsh and a few abandoned ancient dwellings. We do see one pillar sticking up from the marsh marking the site of one of the Seven Wonders of the World, the temple of the goddess, Artemis. It is hard to imagine that this ruin in the marsh of modern day Turkey was once a booming city of over 200,000, and the centre of imperial worship and the worship of the great goddess Artemis. It was an important seaport. It was a financial, cultural, and religious phenomenon of the ancient Roman Empire. It is now 6 miles from the sea!

With the help of the biblical writer, Luke, we return to that city when it was at its peak.

As we travel with Paul into ancient Ephesus we see an impressive skyline. In the West, we usually see the skyline dominated with financial institutions and huge corporate buildings. But when Paul entered Ephesus he would have seen a skyline populated with religious temples. As we walk down the main thoroughfare we see statues of the emperors. We also can see beautiful fountains. But it is not a religious city alone. We see the huge agora, full of people shopping in the ancient shopping centre. There is a stadium which seats 25,000 people.

But the most important building on the skyline is the gigantic temple of Artemis.

It is the first structure ever constructed entirely of marble. It rises 60 feet in the air. It is 425 feet long and 225 feet wide. It is supported by 127 columns. One look at this temple and we know this is what defines Ephesus.

Now we understand why Demetrius, the silversmith, is so upset about the mission work of Paul. It isn't that Paul's teaching has singled out their temple, but the implications of there only being one true God and his only Son, Jesus Christ, can't be good for those who make their living selling silver statues of Artemis. He is upset by the mass conversion that happened earlier and begins to count the potential cost. He makes a stirring speech to an anxious crowd. He even convinces them that Paul has made an attack on the temple and Artemis herself. (Read vs. 27, 28). There is nothing quite like combining religious insult with the prospect of financial loss.

Artemis was their primary god, one of the gods of Olympia. She was the goddess of fertility. If you wanted to really worship her you came to Ephesus. You didn't mess with her and her devotees defended her passionately. The city was responsible for the purity of worship of what was possibly the most worshipped deity of their time. The temple also became the largest bank in the Roman Empire.

We can come back from the ancient world of Ephesus for a moment and consider our own religious skyline. Our world is populated with thousands of religions and innumerable houses of worship and statues of idols. Some of these religions are new some of them older than Christianity. How can we claim that Jesus is superior to them all? Our world champions toleration and celebrates this diversity. We could argue that the true gods in our society are not statues, but pleasure, money and fame. How should we respond to this skyline of religious options?

By living as disciples of Jesus.

Back in Ephesus, Demetrius is quite persuasive. Sporadic but passionate chanting begins. "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" People are running around and getting others to join the mob, though they don't even know what started the commotion. A murmur in the crowd says something has to be done about this Paul and the Christians, so they begin to hunt for them. They can't find Paul, so they take two Christians that are his companions, Gaius and Aristarchus, and they rush into the theatre, which holds 25,000 people. Paul wants to come, but his friends won't let him. So, there in the theatre two Christians must face a raucous mob alone.

Mass confusion rules. Finally, the Jews, wanting to distance themselves from these Christians, push forward some guy named Alexander. He begins to speak and the crowd begins to hush. They realize he is a Jew. Wait a minute! The Jews only believe in one God. They don't believe that Artemis is a god. Why should we listen to him? What was chaos becomes unity. A deafening chant can be heard throughout the city. "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" They shout in unison for two hours!

The city clerk is one of the most influential political figures in the city. So his presence silences the crowd, because they are hopeful that he will take action against the Christians. His response is basically two fold.

1. Artemis' greatness and her place in Ephesus are indisputable (read v. 35). So, it doesn't matter what anyone says about their God and the Christians haven't directly harmed or blasphemed Artemis.
2. We are in danger of being charged with rioting, which was a serious offense in the eyes of Romans. The end result was that the crowd went home unsatisfied and the Christians were released. Luke was demonstrating that Christians were not the ones responsible for civil unrest in the Roman Empire, but in fact it was their opponents that often stirred up trouble.

So, if we go to Ephesus today we can stand in that theatre and imagine the ghosts of the past chanting, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians." How great was Artemis? Here's what's left

of her temple. There isn't much more to the old city, just a theatre to remember a commotion long ago. It isn't a recent development. Here's an incident from the 1100's.

1100 A.D.: A troop of Crusaders stops at a muddy little village in Asia Minor. Their leader looks around, confused. This place is not what he expected. He read in the ancient texts that this was a large seaport with many ships docked in its bay. It isn't. The sea is almost three miles away. The village is located in a swamp. There are no ships to be seen. The leader asks someone if this is Ephesus. He is told it was once but is now called Ayasalouk. He asks about the harbour and the ships but they are long gone. When he asks about the Temple the answer is:

"Temple? What temple? We have no temple here..."

The temple was destroyed by the Goths in AD 262 and never rebuilt. The bay silted up after that and the whole area became a stagnant marshland full of mosquitoes. It became so bad that it was eventually abandoned altogether. How hollow do those chants sound now?

On that day thousands of people gathered to shout how great Artemis was and only two Christians stood in their midst. But, the gospel of Christ prevailed. The perspective that we must gain through this historical fact is this: There will always be another Artemis and they too will crumble. Only the name of Jesus Christ will prevail in eternity. Yes, there are some religions older than Christianity, but there are none older than God and his eternal Son! We need to remember our brothers and sisters who are experiencing NT type persecution today: beheading; stoning; crucifixion; women and children being raped and sold into slavery – because they are Christian. The cry is not, "Great is Artemis" but "Allahu akbar". Muslims may not have idols, or even pictures, that they worship but they don't worship Jesus, and it is only through Jesus that we can get to know God. Please understand, I am not saying that all Muslims are fanatics, but unless they come to faith in Christ they are without hope.

When all is said and done, it is the name of Jesus Christ that will be shouted in God's eternal kingdom, while others will be in ruins.

Read Hab.2:18-20.

*"Of what value is an idol carved by a craftsman?*

*Or an image that teaches lies?*

*For the one who makes it trusts in his own creation;*

*he makes idols that cannot speak.*

*19 Woe to him who says to wood, 'Come to life!'*

*Or to lifeless stone, 'Wake up!'*

*Can it give guidance?*

*It is covered with gold and silver;*

*there is no breath in it."*

*20 The Lord is in his holy temple;*

*let all the earth be silent before him.*

There is no God like our God. The people of God can live their Christian mission in confidence. We are the TEMPLE of the Holy Spirit! God dwells in us and his mission

cannot be thwarted. There is opposition, but it will crumble. Our task is to hold on to the truth of the one living God and proclaim to a world that desperately needs to know. The opposition can get noisy sometimes, but it cannot be victorious. Jesus Christ has won the victory and we share in his spoils!

We travelled to the past, but now we travel to the future. Picture a heavenly kingdom and a gathering unlike any you have ever seen. Countless people and innumerable angels. We are gathered around a throne and at the centre of that throne is the Lord Jesus Christ himself. Gathered there are even those that were killed because they would not deny his name.

*Rev 7:9-10 Then I looked, and there was a large crowd of people. There were so many people that no one could count them all. They were from every nation, tribe, race of people, and language of the earth. They were standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They all wore white robes and had palm branches in their hands. 10 They shouted loudly, "Victory belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."*

*And the elder said, "These are the ones who have come out of the great suffering. They have washed their robes with the blood of the Lamb, and they are clean and white. 15 So now these people are before the throne of God. They worship God day and night in his temple. And the one who sits on the throne will protect them. 16 They will never be hungry again. They will never be thirsty again. The sun will not hurt them. No heat will burn them. 17 The Lamb in front of the throne will be their shepherd. He will lead them to springs of water that give life. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."*