



DEVOTIONAL TIME

02-09-2015 @ 0900

"Are You Open To Instruction?"

Acts 19:1-10

SOMETHING BEAUTIFUL

Something beautiful! Something good!
All my confusion He understood.
All I had to offer Him was brokenness and strife,
But He made something beautiful of my life!

Acts 19:1-10

"While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul traveled through the interior of the province and arrived in Ephesus. There he found some disciples and asked them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?" "We have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit," they answered. Paul went into the synagogue, and for three months spoke boldly with the people, holding discussions.... But some of them were stubborn, and would not believe, ... So Paul left them and took the believers with him, and every day he held discussions in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. This went on for two years, so that all the people who lived in the province of Asia, both Jews and Gentiles, heard the Word of the Lord."

QUESTIONS FOR TODAY

- Do you know people so entrenched in their own opinion(s) that no amount of new data, clear evidence, or persuasive logic could ever move them from their cherished conviction(s)?
- Have *you* ever been confronted with new discoveries, fresh ideas, or different perspectives that challenged your convictions or perceptions of "Truth", "Beauty", and "Goodness"?
- Did God ever "operate outside the scope" of your own cherished expectations or closely-held ideas? What did you do to make sense of that? Did you debate, delay, or simply deny it?

Learning something new can be fun! Experiencing something "different" can expand our personal horizons. Meeting someone "new" can unlock personal potential we never realized. But there is a risk. In the middle of all this "newness", we may uncover confusion & challenge we never expected. If the "new material" or "strange person" conflicts with our bedrock belief system(s), we can face a real dilemma. So we "move on" to the new, or "stay put" in the old? When "progressive people" build new bypasses, or widen highways, there are those who refuse to even try these "improvements", just complaining about dirt, delay, and inconvenience. Others simply affirm: "We've never done it that way before," and insist "It can't be better than what we already know!" This closed-minded attitude serves us poorly enough when we deal with merely human agents in a secular situation. It gets us in even more "hot water" when we bring that attitude to God; when He wants to teach us something new, we can "stymie" our spiritual growth into the fully human "agents of Grace" He designed us to become. It's easy to "get comfortable" in our faith, if we believe we already know all there is to know about "God", "Church", "Worship", and "Religion". (Like these new believers, we are often confronted with an aspect of our faith we've not yet heard about. When this happens, we must choose: either we prayerfully embrace its challenge, or reject it as "unworkable". "Stepping into new territory" entails risk, and the "journey" can be exciting or terrifying—sometimes *both*...especially if it's a "faith journey"! God loves us as we are, but perpetually calls us to deeper life and fuller joy, and that means staying open to new direction and further insight. God, grant us the Grace of Living Listening! Remind us we are perpetual students in the Way of Faith. Help us hear Your Spirit with hopeful hearts. When it is time to "take our Covenant to the next level", empower us to love deeply enough to dare the difficulty our spiritual grow may demand. As Your Son went "all-out" for us, make us willing to go "all-in" for Him, confident that He will complete in us all the "Good Work" He began in our Baptism!



DEVOTIONAL TIME

02-10-2015 @ 0900

"It's Jesus Who Delivers—Not a 'Magic Phrase'!"

Acts 19:11-16

SOMETHING BEAUTIFUL

Something beautiful! Something good!
All my confusion He understood.
All I had to offer Him was brokenness and strife,
But He made something beautiful of my life!

Acts 19:11-16

"God was performing unusual miracles through Paul. Even handkerchiefs and aprons he had used were taken to the sick, and their diseases were driven away, and the evil spirits would go out of them. Some Jews who traveled around and drove out evil spirits also tried to use the Name of the Lord Jesus to do this. They said to the evil spirits, "I command you in the name of Jesus, whom Paul preaches." Seven brothers, who were the sons of a Jewish High Priest named Sceva, were doing this. But the evil spirit said to them, "I know Jesus, and I know about Paul; but you – who are you?" The man who had the evil spirit in him attacked them with such violence that he overpowered them all. They ran away from his house, wounded, and with their clothes torn off."

QUESTIONS FOR TODAY

- Can you remember using "buzz words" or "key phrases" you heard others "use in prayer" to try to get God to "come through" for you? Did you honestly think it was "all about the words"?
- Can you recall other times you simply "called upon Jesus" with simple honesty, and found God "answered your cry" in an amazing and totally unexpected way?
- How do you *know* God? How does that "knowledge" brighten your life and warm your heart? Do you experience "deliverance" daily? How does its power flow to others around you?

People who "*know* God" live, speak, and act with power the rest of the world finds "amazing", even "impossible"! God is more than "guiding Principle" or "central Force" in life; the Lord is personal, even intimate Presence who reveals Love and Fidelity that enlightens and blesses every aspect of their existence. When they pray, divine Power manifests in mysterious but real expressions of holy Care and sacred Resourcefulness. Sadly, many "observers" miss the point, looking upon "prayer" as a kind of "sacred spell" or "magic incantation". God, however, is not to be "bought", "cajoled", or "forced to perform" according to our whims, wishes, or wants. God remains sovereign, even when people of faith "ask the impossible"! God desires our ultimate freedom in the perfection of Divine Love, and will act in Grace and Mercy to bring us to the fullness of "Life-in-Joy". That does NOT mean He will "cave in" to our every request. Instead, it may well involve pointing us in directions we'd rather not go, and urging us to reach out to people we'd never approach. Rather than "getting God to do what we want God to do", we may need to "slow down", seek His Will humbly, and then proceed in accord with His Guidance. Once that process is operative, "miracles" flow! There's no need for "mumbo-jumbo", "hocus-pocus", or "presto-chango-abracadabra"! God, grant us the Grace of Joyous Trust! Lead us in the Way of Prayer that honors Your Love, submits to Your Wisdom, and reveals Your Power. Mold our souls in the true Faith! Reveal Your saving Intent to bring us all the only Liberty that lasts in the only Life that matters. Keep us centered in an "attitude of gratitude", so any needs we present arise from prayer that celebrates Your constant Kindness and accesses Your steadfast Solitude!



DEVOTIONAL TIME

02-11-2015 @ 0900

"Brace For the Storm of Controversy!"

Acts 19:23-34

SOMETHING BEAUTIFUL

Something beautiful! Something good!
All my confusion He understood.
All I had to offer Him was brokenness and strife,
But He made something beautiful of my life!

Acts 19:23-34

"It was at this time that there was serious trouble in Ephesus because of the Way of the Lord. A certain silversmith named Demetrius made silver models of the temple of the goddess Artemis, and his business brought a great deal of profit to the workers. So he called them all together with others whose work was like theirs, and said to them. 'Men, you know that our prosperity comes from this work. Now, you can see and hear from yourselves what this fellow Paul is doing. He says that hand-made gods are not gods at all, and he has succeeded in convincing many people, both here in Ephesus, and in nearly the whole province of Asia. There is danger, then, that this business of ours will get a bad name.'As the crowd heard these words, they became furious, and started shouting....The uproar spread throughout the whole city!"

QUESTIONS FOR TODAY

- Have you ever been "shamed into silence" about your faith? Have you "balked at standing up for your faith" because public perception, beliefs, or mores were contrary to yours?
- Were you ever dismayed to read or hear a news report that labeled your faith as "hateful", "mean-spirited", or "dangerous"? Did you wish to "hide your faith" 'til "the fuss died down"?
- What did you think when a "believer" stepped forward to address some "anti-religious" political grandstanding with a well-reasoned and compelling defense of authentic faith?

Paul has stirred up a real "hornet's nest" of discontent; by sharing the Gospel fearlessly, he has hit some influential people in the pocketbook...and they aren't having it! By inciting bitterness in their fellow citizens, they arouse a city-wide uproar. How many of us would have been quaking out of our sandals in such a situation? Why be so afraid of "what others might think"? Well...the price of such conviction can be steep! Consider what Luke is sharing with us: Paul has been hounded from town to town, sometimes politely dismissed by the "sophisticated" and "wise", often mocked and reviled by those who found his Message a "scandal" and "blasphemous", beaten with rods and imprisoned, or pelted with rocks and left for dead... What in the world made the "Gospel of Jesus Christ" so crucial and precious, especially to a man who had once persecuted it ruthlessly? More properly, we must ask, "*Who* made the Gospel so precious?" *Jesus did!* When Paul met Him on the Damascus road, Jesus turned his world upside down...and Paul could never be the same! In the face of all that Love, Grace, and Mercy, Paul could not continue on the course he had originally set for himself. Jesus revealed such a captivating vision of Eternal Life in the fullness of Divine Love that Paul spent the rest of his life "spreading the Word" of this Good News to as many people as he could invite...regardless of the cost to him; he simply loved Jesus too much to do less! God, grant *us* the Grace of Fearless Gratitude! When the "worldly" unleash "hurricanes of contempt", empower us to persevere! Brace us in Beatitude that will enable us to "STAND" when the "typhoons of folly" seek to silence our witness. As Your Son endured "the Cross", and Paul, "the Sword", may we endure in "storms" we must face!



DEVOTIONAL TIME

02-12-2015 @ 0900

“Brace For the Storm of Controversy!” (Part 2)

Acts 19:23-34

SOMETHING BEAUTIFUL

Something beautiful! Something good!
All my confusion He understood.
All I had to offer Him was brokenness and strife,
But He made something beautiful of my life!

Acts 19:23-34

“It was at this time that there was serious trouble in Ephesus because of the Way of the Lord...The uproar spread throughout the whole city! The mob grabbed Gaius and Aristarchus...and rushed with them from the theater...they all shouted together the same thing for two hours: ‘Great is Artemis of Ephesus!’ At last the city clerk was able to calm the crowd. ‘Fellow Ephesians!’ he said. ‘Everyone knows that the city of Ephesus is the keeper of the temple of the great Artemis, and of the sacred stone that fell down from heaven! You have brought these men here, even though they have not robbed temples, or said evil things about our goddess!’”

QUESTIONS FOR TODAY

- Can you remember “facing an issue” in which a wide-spread practice or traditional usage was in direct contradiction to Gospel values? (e.g., bullying, cheating/theft, marital infidelity, etc.)
- Did you find yourself “afraid to speak up” because everybody else around you seemed quite comfortable with “business as usual” or “status quo”? Did it cause you “sleepless nights”?
- What did you think of those who “stepped up” to advocate “course correction” or “attitudinal adjustment”, even in the face of bitter opposition and fierce persecution?

Controversy can get painful, even deadly on occasion! This may explain why many among us would choose to “go along to get along” if at all possible. Controversial witness to Gospel Truth in the face of injustice, tyranny, and outright error often stands us in the “glaring spotlight of disfavor”, utterly surrounded by fists of fury, and penned in with enraged fingers of accusation, while raucous cries of “troublemaker”, “hate-monger”, “rebel”, and “heretic” sound all around us. For all but the most courageous and committed disciples, this fierce opposition can shut down “evangelistic endeavors” and compromise “Christian outreach”. Note in this passage how the “city clerk” had to admit that the disciples hadn’t stolen anything from the local temples, or insulted the “goddess Artemis”; their only “offense” was proclamation of the Gospel! That proclamation became problematic when “faith in Jesus Christ” hurt the sales of silver images and talisman that supported the local economy. The “light” of the Gospel was disbursing the “darkness” of pagan superstition, based on the wisdom of Scripture, and signified by ministry of miracles. But this “love-based evangelism” aroused furious hatred in the hearts of those who feared its growing influence, and saw only threat in its spread. Things have not changed much over the millennia; we who “know God” will make the “worldly folk” nervous. When we witness to the Kingdom of Heaven, those who are content in the “things of earth” will see only what they stand to lose. Thus, a “controversy” arises! “Children of God” will not have an easy time there. We will need to “seek God’s Will” patiently, “stand on God’s Word” faithfully, “testify to God’s Love” courageously, and “let God’s Light shine” where it will! God, grant us the Grace of Stout Souls and Light Hearts! When controversy comes, as it will when darkness opposes Your Light, keep us calm in the face of its rage, patient in the pangs of its persecution, and true to the Savior who still desires that “all be one” in Him! He faced the Cross for love of us, and darkness could not stand against the Light He revealed on the Third Day! Let us “light the darkness” in His Peace! Empower us to “warm the cold” in His Love, and “calm the stormy” in His Truth!



DEVOTIONAL TIME

02-13-2015 @ 0900

“Voices of Calm in the Storm of Controversy!”

Acts 19:36-20:1

SOMETHING BEAUTIFUL

Something beautiful! Something good!
All my confusion He understood.
All I had to offer Him was brokenness and strife,
But He made something beautiful of my life!

Acts 19:36-20:1

[After two hours of uproar in the theater of Ephesus] “the city clerk was able to calm the crowd... ‘If Demetrius and his workers have an accusation against anyone, we have authorities and regular days for court; charges can be made there! But if there is something more that you want, it will have to be settled in a legal meeting of citizens. For after what has happened today, there is a danger that we will be accused of a riot! There is no excuse for all this uproar, and we would not be able to give a good reason for it!’ After saying this, he dismissed the meeting. After the uproar died down, Paul called together the believers, and with words of encouragement, said good-bye to them. Then he left, and went on to Macedonia.”

QUESTIONS FOR TODAY

- Did you ever have to “step in” during a controversy, and try to “referee the dispute” by an appeal to “common sense” and “good will”? How did that work out?
- Were you ever among those who needed a “referee” to help you see a “better way” to handle the dispute which aroused such fear, rage, and other “negative energies”?
- Given these experiences, how important is it to you now to “present the Gospel” in ways that aid others who need to see “common ground” rather than “points of conflict”?

Calm voices can quell controversies, whether they proceed from a simply “secular” basis, or arise from a “spiritual” foundation. Consider Luke’s comparison of the city clerk of Ephesus with the Apostle Paul; both men faced the fury of a frenzied mob. Each had his own understanding of what was wrong and how to proceed. The city clerk let people “sound off” for about two hours, (maybe under the hot Mediterranean sun?) Then he stepped in, voicing the “legal approach” to offer them an “official venue” of complaint. His basic argument was simple: “You people know better than this. You know who you are. You know how we do things around here. If foreigners from Rome have to step in, we’re not going to be able to justify all this fuss!” Paul’s approach was equally simple, just a bit more “laid back”. He knew that neither he nor his companions would receive a sympathetic hearing from the chanting mob. So he stayed quietly “off-site” ‘til the uproar was over, then gathered with those who “believed” to offer some follow-up encouragement and a final farewell. At that point, Paul moved on to offer the Gospel elsewhere. The growth of the Church in Ephesus was God’s business, not his. There are times we “believers” need to witness in the face of controversy, but we must never seek conflict for its own sake, or for “attention”, or even for “the glory of God”. When “the point has been made”, our task is to function as “peacemakers” and “bridge-builders”, not “war-mongers” or “wall-raisers”. God, grant us the Grace of Peaceable Perspective. Enable us to offer the Gospel of Your Son with respect for our hearers. When controversy erupts, as darkness and light contend, be with us to help us discern the direction we must proceed, to remain in Your Will and true to Your Spirit. When unexpected “allies” assist us, help us work with them in the “openness” of Your Son!