

Part 35: Riots and Revolution

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May 11th, 2025

In 1862, Victor Hugo wrote a book *Les Misérables*. Since its publication it has gone on to be one of the longest running Broadway musicals of all time and has been adapted to film countless times. The first adaptation was a silent film in 1909, then there was the 1935 version, an update in 1958, another in 1998, and most recently one in 2012.

The book was written a hundred and 170 years ago, and it describes the events of the French Revolution some 230 years ago. But the ongoing appeal of Hugo's work is how clearly he describes not a historical moment—but the human condition.

He described history as, "the epoch of riots." For Hugo, the human heart is prone to riot. He describes riots as "right at the bottom, but wrong in form," they are "violent although strong [striking at random] yet walking like a blind elephant."

In other words riots want good things—but despite the violent means they employ—they rarely achieve their goal. If we really want change, if we really want things for the better, we must learn not how to lead a riot—but a revolution.

Riots prioritize the immediate in hopes of an enduring future—but revolutions are built when individuals give up the gain of the immediate in order to strive for the enduring good.

This epoch of riots lives in our own world today. We are a riotous people. We see it play out in social media, outrage mobs and cancel culture almost daily. When toddler throw a tantrum to secure their will—they express the same level of violence. Your desire to secure comfort through Amazon splurges or Netflix binges is just as uncontrollable. We riot to get what we want—but in an age of riots—no one seems to have what they want.

What we need, is a revolution. A real force of change and the assurance of true hope.

Our passage today shows how faith in Jesus and the hope of the gospel fits us with such power and promise in a world, and in our own hearts, which are every riotous, but rarely satisfied.

For Hugo, the story of failed riots is described as those who see the beauty of light but fail to grasp it. But the gospel shows us the true light of beauty held out for us in Jesus--and it shows us how to lay hold of it with certainty even in this age of chaos and confusion.

What we will see today is this: **Jesus provides a revolution without rival**. We will see this in two ways: first we will see **A Revolution of True Power**, then we will examine **A Revolution without Rival**.

All of our events this morning are a continuation of Paul's ministry in Ephesus. As Paul and the church continued to hear the word of God and preach the word of God we see this profound summary statement in **Acts 19:10**, "[that] all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks."

But as we see in Acts, and in our own lives today—the increase of the gospel often brings with it the increase of opposition to the gospel. As the gospel revealed its power—the people of Ephesus responded to it in varied ways. It’s those responses which we will follow today.

That brings us to our first point today: **A Revolution of True Power.**

Luke draws our attention to the spectacular nature of that power in our opening verses: **Acts 19:11-12**, "And God was doing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, so that even handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched his skin were carried away to the sick, and their diseases left them and the evil spirits came out of them."

You might be wondering, "What in the world are we talking about here?" And that's reasonable. Because while we do see healings and miracles by the Apostles--we don't really see things like this where pieces of fabric seem to be the cause of it.

But, Luke explains these unique events in three ways. First, he draws our attention to the fact that it was God doing the work. This was not the result of men trying to do something--this was a work of God. Second, Luke is intentionally redundant. He says God was doing "extraordinary miracles." I don't know about you--but most miracles are extraordinary. That's the nature of a miracle. But Luke uses two words to communicate how unprecedented this was even for the ministry of the Apostles. This was not normal then, and it is certainly not normative today.

It was the work of God, and the extraordinary shape of it that leads us to Luke’s third point which draws out the contrast between God’s work and the work of these other men. As I read this I want you to consider two questions: Where is the place of power? And, what is the result of power? **Acts 19:13-20**, “Then some of the itinerant Jewish exorcists undertook to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, “I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul proclaims.” Seven sons of a Jewish high priest named Sceva were doing this. But the evil spirit answered them, “Jesus I know, and Paul I recognize, but who are you?” And the man in whom was the evil spirit leaped on them, mastered all of them and overpowered them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded. And this became known to all the residents of Ephesus, both Jews and Greeks. And fear fell upon them all, and the name of the Lord Jesus was extolled. Also many of those who were now believers came, confessing and divulging their practices. And a number of those who had practiced magic arts brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all. And they counted the value of them and found it came to fifty thousand pieces of silver. So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily.”

So, where is the place of power?

These two stories show two different understandings don't they? Both would agree that it has to do with Jesus—but the relationship of power and Jesus is the important issue.

The Seven Sons of Sceva believe that the power is in the *name* of Jesus in a strict sense. We see that when it says they “invoked” (literally pronounced) the name of Jesus over the evil spirits.

Now we do admit that there is power in the name of Jesus. But what we mean when we say that is important. When I proposed to my wife, I offered to her my hand in marriage. Can you imagine if in her acceptance of that she took out a blade and cut off my hand happily thinking that she had fulfilled that idea?

The phrase, “take my hand in marriage,” is meant to communicate not the literal nature of my hand, but the sum total of my person. So the power *in the name* of Jesus is really the power *of Jesus*. There is no power in the *name*—there is power only in the *named*.

That’s what these men got wrong. They invoked the name of Jesus, “the one whom Paul proclaims.” They had no interest in knowing or understanding the person of Jesus, they just wanted the perks that seem to be associated with it.

We might do that today. I’ve seen many men and women become quite interested in the name of Jesus when they find themselves attracted to a Christian. Too many times I’ve seen non-believers begin to confess the name of Jesus to the end that they might be able to date a follower of Jesus. I’ve heard many people in dire circumstances convert to Christianity in hopes that their prayer to Jesus would be like a magic spell that removes suffering and makes their life, happy, wealthy and wonderful. It’s no surprise that every U.S. president has claimed some association to Christianity. There is sometimes something to be gained in simply confessing and identifying with the name of Jesus.

But what this story shows is that the power of the gospel is not Christ *ala carte* but instead the power of the gospel is *all in Christ*.

We see that difference expressed by those in **Acts 19:17** who had fear fall upon them and in whom “the name of Jesus was extolled.” That means, glorified, honored, exalted. The first group of men saw a way in which the name of Christ changed things for them—but these men and women saw how the name of Christ changed them.

The power we need to change our lives for the better is not given to us from Christ. It is given to us in Christ. That’s it. When we come to him for the forgiveness of sins and for the power of redemption in him he becomes the blazing center of our lives—he himself becomes compellingly beautiful and comprehensively powerful. Might you consider how you view Jesus?

What is the result of power?

Well, the Seven Sons of Sceva attempted to use the power of Jesus in two ways. They hoped that it would deliver people from evil so that it might elevate their own standing before men. They genuinely wanted to help, but it was because they wanted to be seen as helpful. The name of Jesus was just the tool they were going to use to do that.

The result of their misunderstanding and false heart was that they were declared as no-names by the evil spirit and they had their socks knocked off of them by the possessed man. What did their power achieve? It failed to deliver any meaningful change, it left a man enslaved, and it caused them to flee in shame and nakedness.

Meanwhile, those who extolled the name of Jesus experienced something profoundly different. Through their experience with the person of Jesus they were delivered from darkness and sin.

Ephesus was home of cultic practices galore, many of them of secret and sexual sorts. And here, so compelled by the beauty and fear of Jesus they not merely confessed Christ publically, but they confessed their sins publically. Luke tells us in verse **18**, that they came, “confessing and divulging their practices.”

That meant no one knew about these dirty things—instead they took their dirty and hidden things and they brought them out in the open. The Sons of Sceva attempted to look powerful and competent—but ended up looking powerless and shameful. But when the gospel grips our hearts we willingly exposes our sinful hearts so that we might see the power and love of Jesus.

Later on Paul would write back to the church in Ephesus saying this: **Ephesians 5:8-14**, “For at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret. But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, for anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says, “Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.”

The power of the gospel breaks the power of sins hold. We all have things in our hearts which we do not like, which we fear anyone finding out of. You can try to keep it on your own—but if you want to be rid of it you must bring it into the light of Christ. You can attempt to bury it under distraction or business, but you must bring it to Christ if you wish to be free. The reasons we bring it to Christ is that we might be free from the condemnation of sin, the reason we might bring it to light to others is that we might receive help to in the power of the Holy Spirit.

That is a revolution of true power. That’s how we change. We are changed by Christ in such a way where we want to rid ourselves of sin so that we might enjoy freedom and friendship with God and with others. If you want meaningful change, if you want a glorious revolution that lasts, I pray you might see Jesus in all his glory so that you might see your sin in all its shame. Then we can repent daily, and daily cast our sin at the foot of the cross and by God’s grace through the Holy Spirit, and in the fellowship of the church live as children of the light.

Luke tells us that this confession was not only humbling—but it was costly. They not only confessed sin, but they went to great lengths to rid themselves of the devices which led them to sin. They burned their magic books, which totaled 50,000 pieces of silver. A piece of silver was a day’s labor, and in today’s economy that’s a sum total of 11 million dollars—up in smoke. We must give up our life to come to faith in Jesus. So it’s no surprise when Christians are willing to give up everything to not go back to sin.

This joyful economic sacrifice is meant to stand in contrast with what comes next.

This is our second point. **A Revolution without Rival.**

The Sons of Sceva saw Jesus as a means to arrogantly make their own revolution. But what we see in the craftsmen of Ephesus are those who are motivated by fear of revolution.

The story picks up in. **Acts 19:23-27**, "About that time there arose no little disturbance concerning the Way. For a man named Demetrius, a silversmith, who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought no little business to the craftsmen. These he gathered together, with the workmen in similar trades, and said, "Men, you know that from this business we have our wealth. And you see and hear that not only in Ephesus but in almost all of Asia this Paul has persuaded and turned away a great many people, saying that gods made with hands are not gods. And there is danger not only that this trade of ours may come into disrepute but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis may be counted as nothing, and that she may even be deposed from her magnificence, she whom all Asia and the world worship.""

So we meet a man named Demetrius. He's part of Ephesus' economy of tradesmen and he specifically happens to be one who makes trinkets associated with the patron goddess of Ephesus--Artemis.

Ephesus has huge statues dedicated to the Caesars, but the crown jewel of Ephesus was the Temple of Artemis. If you've heard of the seven wonders of the ancient world—the temple of Artemis was one of them. In fact, seven times larger than the Parthenon in Athens, it was considered the crown jewel of those ancient wonders.

And Demetrius is no dummy. He sees that Paul is going around telling people that gods made by hands are no gods at all. While Demetrius cannot see the irony of worshipping a goddess who is dependent upon his craftsmanship—what he can see is that Paul's message is bad for business. So he gathers not just the idol makers, but all the craftsmen of Ephesus and lays out three concerns.

First, if people don't worship idols--the craftsman industry itself will die. Second, if people aren't making idols, then the Temple of Artemis won't be filled with the beautiful things we make and it will be counted as nothing compared to the flashier temples. And, third, if we lose our jobs, then idols go away, and the temple becomes lame, and if that were to happen, Artemis in all her glory would be deposed from her magnificence. She was after all, worshipped in Asia and the whole world.

Notice how small gods always lead to big problems. In Athens we saw that the God of the Bible doesn't live in temples made by hands, nor does he need anything. The God of the Bible needs nothing and gives to mankind everything. A big God solves his own problems. But small gods have real needs and real rivals.

And if a goddess has a rival--then those who hope in her will be constantly fearful.

Now, we don't know if Demetrius is sincere or not--but either way we can see the problem of his logic. If Demetrius is insincere and cares only of his own pocket book--he's admitting in a way that the whole of his life and happiness is dependent upon a piece of rock being seen as a true and living being. That's a dubious premise.

If Demetrius is sincere and does care about the glory of Artemis--then he's admitting the sad reality that the glory of Artemis is dependent upon the efforts of men who are subject to layoffs and misfortune.

The solution is to riot. Well preserved today is the theater in Ephesus, a massive amphitheater which housed more than Washington Grizzly Stadium. And it was filled to capacity as the mob traveled there crying out in **Acts 19:28**, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians."

They mob can't find Paul, but Paul wanted to go into it—but he was prevented by groups of believing and non-believing friends. This riot is so violent that in verse 33, the Jews are worried that they might get swept up in this too. So they send out a poor guy named Alexander to distance Jews from the Christians, but before he can open his mouth the crowd, 25,000 strong, began to chant "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians" for two hours.

This is out of control. In verse 29 Luke tells us the whole city was thrown into confusion, and look at what he says in **Acts 19:32**, "Now some cried out one thing, some another, for the assembly was in confusion, and most of them did not know why they had come together."

What a snapshot of the human heart! So often we are caught up in the movements and moments of the world, and for those brief moments it seems in our hearts that there is nothing more important than this--yet if we are honest--we aren't quite sure why we are here.

Have you ever set out to question your emotions? There are times where we find ourselves caught up in external or internal riots. We know we are supposed to buy this product--but have you asked your heart why you need to? We know we are supposed to respond in rage to this person who offended us, we feel we ought to rush to that screen to view what satisfies us. But have you ever asked why you think that might work? Have you ever asked what it is you are actually wanting?

These people wanted security--and they thought the biggest threat was the good news of a God made without hands. But they never questioned why their goddess or their hope was so fragile.

And this heated moment turned to be just a flash in the pan. In verses 35 through 41 the Town Clerk--the ruling official of the day--shows up and quiets the crowd and he makes three points: One, He says, "Look around--this is Artemis' town, no one can argue that. It will never change."

Two, He says, "These men aren't doing anything wrong." This is less a testament to the message of Paul, but more to the manner of Paul. Time and time again we see how public officials cannot find moral grounds to condemn the Christians. As Paul writes to Titus to set an example, **Titus 2:8**, "so that an opponent may be put to shame, having nothing evil to say about us." The message of Jesus is offensive, but the messengers ought not to be.

Three, he says, "You're the ones in danger. You've started a riot--and that's unbecoming of Roman citizens and if Rome finds out--you'll be punished."

And in light of those three points, the crowd, which moments ago was ready to tear Ephesus to the ground, went home. Demetrius didn't even feel it necessary to go pursue Paul in court. It was just gone.

Our own lives often show that things we are extremely willing to die for in one moment, are often forgotten the very next. We live as it were, untethered, from things which bring us stability. To borrow from Hugo again--we live without the motivation to see our riots into meaningful revolution.

This will always happen when the focus of our lives is on things that change. But the center point of our lives is a God who is without rival. Our God is in the heavens and he does all that he pleases. His glory will not be diminished. Which means, you don't have to live in fear of your own life being diminished.

The argument of Demetrius was, "What if at the end of the day, after all our idol making, after all our temple worship, after all our chants--Artemis isn't glorious?"

That would be a devastating reality. What if, after investing in vacations and vocations, we get to the end and realize there was no glory in that? What if all of our sacrifice to get the goods of the world by riotous force never got us what we wanted?

These men were worried about the potential of losing their income more than they were of their eternal future. Meanwhile the believers were willingly surrendering eleven million dollars because they knew they had nothing to risk.

Brothers and sisters, the world threatens the gospel with false rivals all the time. We often believe that money, sex, power, and relationships might offer greater security than the gospel. But Jesus has no rival. His glory is unassailable.

The riot was quieted because they said, "The riot isn't worth it—and who could ever change the glory of Artemis." But guess what? You can visit that temple today—and it's in ruins.

Meanwhile, our temple, the God of our glory, the God who took on human flesh and was put to death by human hands, was raised to life by the glory of God for your redemption and his glory. And he now sits not in ruins, but raised in resurrected glory at the right hand of God.

There is no rival to this revolution. **Isaiah 42:8** says this, "I am the LORD; that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to carved idols."

Brothers and sisters if you want the comfort of glory, go to a God who is glorious. If you want true, real and enduring change—go to the Jesus who is that power to change. And run without fear. Give up the riotous measures of the world—let wealth, fame, and worldly power fade for we have a God who needs none of those things to secure for us an inheritance beyond our wildest dreams.

Come to him in faith, and when you've come, be willing to give him everything and more.