

Paul and the Ephesian Church

The Ephesian church was located in the great Roman city of Ephesus, the Roman capital of Asia. It was a port city, in south western Asia, which is today Turkey. If we have not seen the ruins of one of the many great Roman cities of the first century it is hard to imagine how impressive and large these cities were. Ephesus is one of the largest and best preserved. I found it an amazing experience to go there. I saw dozens of large public sandstone buildings with huge fluted columns four and five metres high, an amphitheatre that seats more than a thousand people, paved roads, numerous temples, magnificent sculptures and lots of substantial homes. This was a city that had running water and a sewerage system. The many temples are a reminder that this was a religious age where everyone worshipped one or more gods. The most important god in Ephesus was Artemis, and the biggest temple was dedicated to her. She was often depicted as a huntress carrying a bow and arrows. About a third of the population were slaves. These were men and women spared after a defeat and then sold as servants and labourers. Some were treated well, some were not, some were educated some were not. Colour did not mark out a slave. Men ran that world. It was a patriarchal age. Fathers arranged the marriage of their daughters, who on marriage came under the authority and virtual ownership of their husband. Wealthy women, most notably wealthy widows often had more freedoms and choices. In this world people had obligations to others but there were generally few moral constraints. People were free to do as they like; the only worry was not to offend someone more powerful.

In Acts 18:18-22, 19:1-20 and 20:17-38 we can read of Paul's contacts and interactions with the people of Ephesus. After his missionary work in Athens and Corinth Paul set off by boat to go back to Jerusalem in about 51 AD. On route he stopped over very briefly in Ephesus, meeting with the Jews in the synagogue, promising to return (Acts 18:18-21). Later, when he returned he found Apollos ministering there and he met up with some disciples of John the Baptist who believed Jesus was the Messiah but did not know that after his resurrection Jesus had poured out the Spirit on all believers. Paul instructed them further and the Spirit fell upon them just as it had on all the believers on the day of Pentecost. Again, as on the day of Pentecost those who received the Spirit spoke in tongues to show objectively that the Spirit had come into their lives (Acts 19:1-7).

Paul returned to the synagogue and for three months taught there until a parting of the ways took place. He then began public lectures in the hall of Tyrannus for two years. Luke tells us that Paul was in Ephesus for three years (Acts 20:31). It seems Paul's ministry made such an impact on the city that people stopped buying the little statues of Artemis that her worshippers treasured. The silversmiths who made these religious artefacts stirred up trouble and a huge crowd gathered in the Amphitheatre, demanding that Paul and his fellow missionaries be cast out of the city. Paul had to leave (Acts 19:21-41).

Standing in that huge stone amphitheatre is an amazing experience. To be there is a powerful reminder that the story Acts tells is not a fairy story

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