

Considering Conditions and Circumstances

“And when the city clerk had quieted the crowd, he said: ‘Men of Ephesus, what man is there who does not know that the city of the Ephesians is temple guardian of the great goddess Diana, and of the image which fell down from Zeus?’” Acts 19:35

In the passage quoted from the book of Acts above, the city clerk said that it was common knowledge (among the people of that time) that Ephesus was known for the temple of Diana. As we read this passage over 2,000 years later, it is definitely not common knowledge to us and we must study further to understand who Diana was and why she was so well known. The 19th chapter of Acts also goes into detail about how Paul disrupted a very profitable business of men who were selling silver shrines of Diana. This section of scripture illustrates why it is important to consider the conditions and circumstances of the time we are reading about in the Bible to better understand the truth being taught.

In many ways, day-to-day life during the period of time the Bible was written was much different than what we experience in our culture today. For instance, many people that we read about in the Old Testament lived in tents and were a very transient population. During the time when the New Testament was written, many people lived in cities and the homes they lived in were very different from the homes we live in today. Their homes often had dirt floors, no windows and certainly did not have luxuries such as running water or indoor bathrooms. When their food supplies were affected by famine, they were not able to quickly bring in new supplies by airplane or train. When we understand these facts, it helps us to see why it was critical that they needed to provide for each other’s needs and why there were spiritual laws that governed these responsibilities.

One of the major conditions Christians in the first century faced was the influence of the Jews. If there was any group of people who should have accepted Jesus, it would have been the Jews because Jesus was the promised Messiah. There were definitely some Jews who accepted Jesus; however, there were also many Jewish leaders (Scribes and Pharisee for example) who rejected him. They were envious of Jesus because he took the attention of their followers away from them and they loved the recognition of the people. They also became envious of the Apostles in the same way. Read the following passages in Acts to see what happened as a result of this envy (Acts 13:42-46, 14:1-2, 17:13, 21:27-36). This created a challenging environment for Paul and the Apostles and often led to their lives being threatened. Even in the face of this adversity, they boldly proclaimed the word of God (Acts 13:46, 14:3, 22:1-21). We can learn a lot from how they dealt with these difficult circumstances.

Another difficult situation that Christians had to deal with in the first century was persecution from people other than the Jews. The book of Revelation for instance was written to encourage Christians to remain strong in the face of persecution (Rev. 2:10). Peter also wrote about persecution when he encouraged Christians that were dispersed in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia. Notice he said in Peter 4:12-14, “Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ’s sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy. If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. On their part He is blasphemed, but on your part He is glorified.” We are not told the cause of the persecution he is referring to but it is important to understand the effect these difficult

circumstances had on Christians. In many cases it caused them to be scattered (Acts 8:1, 11:19) and discouraged (Gal. 6:9, 2 Thess. 3:13). It can be difficult for us to relate to what it must have been like to go through this type of persecution but it is important that we learn about it so we can appreciate the type of courage and trust they had in the Lord. We can also make application in our life when we suffer persecution.

Another difficult challenge during this time was idolatry. Idolatry was rampant in some parts of the world and it influenced many people to worship false gods. When the Apostle Paul was in Athens, “he saw that the city was given over to idols” (Acts 17:16) and it “stirred” or “provoked” him to reason with the people in the marketplaces and the philosophers on Mars’ hill. In Ephesus the worship of Diana led many astray. Paul had to deal an issue in Corinth regarding the eating of meat sacrificed to idols. These are just a few examples of how idolatry influenced and affected the lives of many Christians and made it a challenging environment to live in.

In this lesson we considered just a few examples of the conditions and the circumstances that Christians faced in the first century. Hopefully we can see how valuable this information is to our understanding of the truth.

Questions

1. Read Acts 19:22-41 and answer the following questions:

What was the merchandise being sold because of the temple of Diana? _____

What did Paul do that they were upset about? _____

What were the circumstances which caused the people to seize Paul's travel companions (Gaius and Aristarchus)? _____

What circumstance led the people to cry out “Great is Diana of the Ephesians!” for almost two hours and why would they do this? (consult a commentary if needed) _____

2. What affect did the living conditions have on people in the First Century and what was the result? _____

3. How did the influence of the Jews over the people affect Christians in the first century? _____

4. Why did the Jews persecute Jesus and Christians? _____

5. How did Paul and the Apostles handle these difficult circumstances? _____

6. Do we face persecution today? If so, how is it different from the first century? _____

7. What challenges did idolatry present to Christians? _____

8. What conditions and circumstances do we face today that can make it challenging as a Christian? _____

Do you think it is more challenging or less challenging than what they faced in the first century and why? _____