

THE BEGINNING OF REALLY BAD BLOOD

Acts 14:1-7

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If one has been paying even the slightest attention to the news, one cannot help but become aware of the **unrest** that is currently ongoing in a number of major cities across the United States. As I said to a person recently, "Given this year with the pandemic and then the riots, this most certainly HAS to be the year that aliens finally do land and make themselves known." What a year this has been!

Or maybe this might be the year that Christ finally does return! If he had come last year many might have said, "Oh, but **why take us out** of this world?" Whereas this year, even many unbelievers would more likely say, "Lord, **get us out** of this world!" Yes, what a year!

For some 35 years I have been doing marital counseling: pre-marital, marital and post-marital. One of the lines that I have used for decades is this: "The major source of marital unrest is unfulfilled expectations." No couple (that I have known) ever enters marriage with the intent of seeing things turn out badly. All enter marriage with the best of hopes. But they also enter marriage with certain expectations and when those expectations are not met, then comes questioning, doubts and even great unrest.

Well...going back almost 2,000 years...when Paul and Barnabas showed up in town and came to the local synagogue, there was an **expectation** that they might bring a good word from the Lord. If the people learned about Paul's past they would have likely learned that he had actually sat at the feet – he had been instructed – by none other than the **famed Gamaliel**, a master rabbi, a master teacher of the law of God. And so upon coming into the synagogue, in each town, it is clear that these two men were given the opportunity to speak, to instruct those gathered from the Holy Scriptures.

Now, what scriptures did they have available to them? They had what we would call "The Old Testament" scriptures – the Hebrew scriptures. At the time that Paul and Barnabas were traveling, while there may have **been some manuscripts** that included some record of Jesus' life and words circulating among the Christians, there was no formal "New Testament" as we know it. And so, just as Jesus had done, Paul and Barnabas made use of

"the law, the prophets and the writings" (meaning the Old Testament scriptures) to make their case that Jesus was indeed the promised Messiah, the Redeemer of Israel, and that it was God's plan to see him suffer and die, as John the Baptist had predicted, as "the Lamb that takes away the sins of the world."

And here in Iconium, just as had taken place in Antioch of Pisidia (back in Acts 13), when the people heard this message, **many believed!** Indeed, here in Acts 14:1 it says, "a GREAT NUMBER of Jews and Gentiles believed."

Hallelujah! One can only imagine how excited Paul and Barnabas must have felt to see so many turning to Christ.

But as noted last Sunday, **not everyone was so positive** about this message. Just as not everyone was cheering while Jesus fed the five thousand or healed a man who had been born blind, so too, not everyone was cheering on Paul and Barnabas. Like Jesus, God was granting Paul and Barnabas great powers to do "miraculous signs and wonders" (verse 3). These signs and wonders were never meant as an end in themselves but were, as the text says, given to "CONFIRM" the message of his grace.

But some didn't like it. And so the people were divided. Can you imagine that? In our modern age can you even imagine a people being divided? Oh my. I was in high school, living in Michigan, back in 1968. To me that was a great year because it was the year the Detroit Tigers won the World Series. But most will remember 1968 for far, far different reasons. Things like...

- The Vietnam War
- The assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
- The assassination of Robert Kennedy
- And while the race riots in Watts, Detroit and Newark had taken place 3 summers earlier, these two deaths only led to more uprisings and more violence
- In late summer there were the national conventions of the Republicans and the Democrats but **will anyone ever forget** the Democrat Convention of 1968 in Chicago? While there may have been cheering inside the convention hall there was WAR on the streets. It was bedlam...chaos. We were SO DIVIDED as a nation.

And now we have 2020. We somehow got through the two national conventions (by having them take place "virtually"). But again this year there is WAR on the streets in Portland, Seattle, San Francisco, Chicago, and elsewhere. In Lancaster we tend to say, "Thank God it is peaceful here," but if those protesting keep their promise, it may even come our way as well.

Unfulfilled expectations – remember? That's the cause of conflict.

For Paul and Barnabas the expectation had been that they would bring a **unifying message** – a good word from Jerusalem or Antioch maybe. But what did they bring instead? A message about how the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem had PUT TO DEATH THE CHRIST, HANGING HIM FROM A TREE. Call it what you want, but to those who believed in Jesus it was nothing short of a LYNCHING!

If, back then, one had never been any great supporter of the Jewish leaders – with their wealth, and pride – then Paul's message have been one that resonated well with a lot of the people. But if one were, on the local level, a **Jewish leader** who aspired towards the kind of power that the Jewish Sanhedrin had, then this was a message that would not have gone over well at all.

And so the people were divided – verse 4 – with some siding with the Jews (meaning the Jewish leaders) and others siding with the apostles.

And so there came to be a plot to get rid of Paul and Barnabas.

- In **Jerusalem** they had crucified Jesus.
- In **Jerusalem** they had stoned Stephen.
- In **Jerusalem**, Herod had put James, one of Jesus' closest followers to death with the sword.

"If they can do it in Jerusalem, we can certainly do it here," must have been the growing motto of those opposed to Paul and Barnabas. For with each day that passed, the plot was thickening. Stoning... "yes...let's stone them to death!"

Interesting thing about stoning. We don't hear much or even anything about people being stoned today. Today we might hear about **beheadings** (of Christians by Islamic terrorist groups, for example), or **death by electrocution** (though Steven King's novel, The Green Mile seems to have pretty

much brought that to an end), or maybe **death by lethal injection**. But long ago, the common way was **death by stoning**.

And if one has ever been over to the Middle East, you can understand why that would be. For just about everywhere you look there are stones: big stones, little stones, stones....stones...everywhere. When I was in Israel, many years ago, I don't think anything impressed me more than the terrain, the geography, and how there were stones everywhere.

Sure, we have stones here in Lancaster, but they are generally covered by rich soil and green grass, or fields of corn or soybeans. But in the Middle East and even on up into Turkey (the location of Antioch of Pisidia, Iconium and Derbe), stones are everywhere.

So they plotted to kill Paul and Barnabas by stoning them.

But when Paul and Barnabas got wind of their plot they left in a hurry, traveled even further to the east (getting close to Tarsus, Paul's hometown) and started in again at Lystra preaching the good news of Jesus Christ.

Now, I want you to take a look ahead in Acts 14...

Paul and Barnabas have left Iconium because of the threat of violence against them and gone on to Lystra. But has that satisfied their enemies? No.

Acts 14:19-20

We will deal with this latter text in Acts 13 in a couple of weeks, but the point right now is to see just how relentless were these who opposed Paul and Barnabas.

- They spoke out against Paul and Barnabas
- They opposed them
- They tried to get the people to rise up against them
- They plotted to stone them
- And then, when Paul and Barnabas left town, they still were not satisfied, so

- They followed them to another town and there again rallied the crowd against them to the point that
- They stoned Paul to death (or so they thought), dragging his seemingly dead body out of the city and dumping it.

Nice people...really nice people. Yeah...right!

Donald Trump would have called them "thugs."

God, on the day of judgment will likely deem them condemned to hell.

Now what are we to glean from all this?

1. Mankind, apart from a work of grace in the heart, is terribly removed from, set apart from and in alienation from God.

A year or so before I met Ruth, but while in seminary, I took a train from my parents home in Illinois back to school in Philadelphia. It was a long ride. In the middle of the night we apparently hit a cow on the track, which stopped the train. The conductor, with a smile on his face, came through the cars saying, "Fresh steaks...fresh steaks." By the time we got to Pittsburgh the train was completely full except for one seat...next to me. It was at that time that a very cute girl, about my age, got on the train. (Remember now, this was **before I had met Ruth**). So she ended up sitting next to me.

We began talking and she found out that I was a student at Westminster Theological Seminary. She said, "Oh, so you're going to become a priest?" I explained that I was a Protestant and that I would likely become a pastor (and not a priest) and that meant...ahhh...that **I could marry**.

The conversation turned to the issue of the gospel and it was then that I made the statement that "by nature we are enemies of God."

"What?" she said. "Where did you hear that?"

"Why, that is what the Bible says," I replied.

"Where does it say that?"

I had a Bible with me, and I am not kidding if I say it took me 30 minutes or more to find the passage I had in mind. I knew it was what Paul had written and in my mind it was in 1 or 2 Corinthians. I FINALLY found it. It was and is in **Romans...**

Romans 5:6-10

Weak...sinners...enemies.

And as God's enemies we were, without that work of saving grace, still under God's wrath.

John 3:36

This is what we might call the **natural state of men and women**. They are not INCLINED towards God, their hearts and minds having been blinded by our enemy.

I think we can tend to forget this once we have come to faith in Christ. We have heard the gospel and believed and so **marvel** that **everyone else** doesn't also hear and believe.

We forget that when Christ himself was here on earth, preaching, performing miracles, raising the dead to life...we forget that they plotted to kill him, and finally, with the crowds shouting "crucify him, crucify him" that is exactly what they did.

That happened because the people were spiritually dead...lost.

2. (The second thing to glean is...) That in order to believe, God needs to change a person's heart.

Ezekiel 36:26

If you are familiar with the film, The Case for Christ, you will recall that it was **this verse** that Lee Strobel's wife, who had herself already come to faith in Christ, prayed over again and again as she prayed for Lee to also come to Jesus.

It is God's work to take hearts of stone and make them hearts of flesh.

Maybe you know someone that you have been praying for and their heart – in respect to the good news of Jesus – is REALLY HARD. This can be

discouraging. But keep praying. I remember a fellow that I spent some time discipling (now many years ago). He didn't come to faith in Christ until he was about 50 years of age. He told me, however, that way back when he was about 20 or 22, he dated a girl who was a Christian. She invited him to go with her to church, and he went. He said he heard the gospel way back then and in this girl he saw it being lived out. But he didn't change. Now, as he talked to me some 30 or so years later he said, "I think of **all the years I wasted**. I could have been living for Christ, but instead I wasted all those years."

It is all in God's timing.

3. We don't see even a hint of retaliatory work against those who opposed Paul and the gospel.

Later, when Paul is actually stoned (and left for dead) instead of reading that Paul and those with him picked up stones and went back into the city to get even, here is what we read...

Acts 14:19-22

Believing that God is over all things, and that until God works in a man's heart it will remain a heart of stone and be opposed to the things of Christ, you learn to accept it and what comes with it. And so you go on concluding that "through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." That is, this is just the way it is going to be.

But no retaliation.

Just prayer, and a continuation of preaching the good news of Jesus Christ.

And that is how we should see things today...