

# INJUSTICE, GODS AMONG US

ACTS 14:1-20    JUNE 3, 2020

The scene before us is one of uncertainty and unrest. In city after city we see the gathering of unpredictable crowds of people, stirred up by words or events, lashing out, sometimes violently. In the midst of the commotion we see *some* trying to speak the truth, while others try to keep people from hearing it. We see lots of different people. Some earnest, some confused, some vengeful. Above all, we see crowds of *needy* people, who find themselves caught up in a physical and spiritual chaos that human systems and ideologies cannot make right.

Am I talking about Acts 14 or our own present reality? The truth is, there is nothing new under the sun. What we see happening around us all has happened before - this is the way of the fallen world.

Many of us are wondering is: What *should* I do? What *can* I do for my city and for this ruined world and for the people around us who are so desperately in need? If you spend time on social media or watching the news, then you know that a lot of people have been *telling* you what to do. How you are '*supposed*' to respond to the present dilemmas. The problem is, so much of that guidance simply leads down the paths of men, tried over and over by many well-meaning people, yet unable to overcome the obstacle. It's like being led halfway up a mountain. It takes a great deal of planning, a great deal of effort, it's hard and demanding. But, in the end, we need to get to the *other side*.

Luckily, we serve a God who *moves* mountains so that He can continue His work of redeeming and saving. He alone is the One who can bring beauty from the ashes of our world. We need to believe that Christ is our only hope. Not just for eternal salvation, but for the transformation of human hearts and the betterment of society. If we think that some method of man, some worldly wisdom, will be able to overcome the obstacles we face in our world today, then we'll make the same mistake as those Israelites who trusted in Egypt to save them from Babylon rather than trusting the Lord.

But let's assume that we're all on board, trusting that God is the One who can bring help and healing to our nation and our messes. The question still lingers: What can *I* do? What is my part and place in the work? What is the way forward? The Holy Spirit wants to lead us and instruct us, using the example of two who have gone this way before. In Acts 14 Barnabas and Paul find themselves in scenes that aren't all that different from the ones playing out in American streets today.

We begin in verse 1, where we read:

**Acts 14:1 - In Iconium they entered the Jewish synagogue, as usual, and spoke in such a way that a great number of both Jews and Greeks believed.**

Our heroes have made their way into the Galatian region of Asia Minor. Paul would later write a letter to churches here that we still read today. History remembers the Galatians as a vain and fickle people.<sup>1</sup> We'll see some of that legendary fickleness in this very text.

The apostles were in Iconium because they had been run out of Antioch. But, in this new city, they operated the same way as before. They had a usual method of ministry and life. Their hearts and behaviors were moored to certain principles. By way of application, it's important that Christians develop a *consistency* in life. God's word says it isn't good for us to be blown about by winds of

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<sup>1</sup>J. Vernon McGee *Acts*

doctrine or different teachings. It isn't good for us to be unstable people, jumping from one trend to another. We are to be steadfast. It's not only so that we can have regular growth in our spiritual lives, but also so that when some rogue wave comes crashing on our side, we're not knocked out by it. So that, "even if the earth gives way and the mountains fall into the sea," we need not fear.

As Christians, we do a lot of different kinds of work among a lot of different kinds of people. But, generally speaking, there are certain consistencies in our life of faith. Gathering together. Worshiping God. Learning and applying His word. Preaching the good news of Jesus Christ. Prayer. Being secure in our understanding of truth.

Following the winds and trends of this world will not only keep us unbalanced as we try to make progress in life, it can also become deadly.

So, Paul and Barnabas, as usual, went to the synagogue. But this "Jewish first" method did not *exclude* anyone. They had love and compassion for all people. And, we find in these stories that their *regular* method was met with a lot of different responses. Some believed. Some didn't. Some laughed. Some asked questions. Some became violent. In Iconium, many believed.

**Acts 14:2 - <sup>2</sup>But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers.**

The source of all the problems of the world today is *unbelief*. We can't even say anymore that the source is *sin*, because sin has been *dealt with* at the cross. The sin problem has been solved. It is *unbelief* which holds back the furtherance of the work of the Gospel. The Gospel which saves lives and changes communities. The Gospel which, when embraced, cures wickedness and makes all things new. We remember how, in Matthew 13, it was because of *unbelief* that Jesus could not do many miracles in Nazareth.

Unbelief not only holds back the work of God, it poisons the world. We see that explained by Paul in Romans 1. He says there that, because people refuse to acknowledge God, the result is all the mess we see in the world today. Fights and murder and greed and corruption and senselessness. We look around at the world today and are heartbroken by what we see. Communities being destroyed. Innocents dying. Countless numbers of people living in fear. But what we see playing out on our screens are the *symptoms* of the underlying problem that the world is full of *unbelievers*.

I always chuckle when I see those t-shirts that say, *Ya'll Need Jesus!* But the fact of the matter is, it's true. Now, we're more hesitant these days to say, "Jesus is the answer" when it comes to some of these societal problems around us. But it really is true, and I can prove it. In Jericho there was a man named Zaccheus. He was a corrupt member of the 1% of the day. He oppressed his neighbors, using a broken system to enrich himself. *But then he met Jesus!* Then he believed. And *immediately* his corruption was gone. Not *only* did he stop oppressing people, he became one of the most socially generous people in the city. Giving four times back to those in need.

Zaccheus didn't need sensitivity training. He didn't need to have a hashtag directed at him to ruin his life. He needed an encounter with a God who not only wanted to save him, but then *use* him to do good in his community. Because when God takes hold of a life, He not only cleans it, He fills it with *love*. And love does what information or anger or politics never can.

The book of Hebrews says that, because the Israelites did not believe, they were not able to enter into the rest God wanted for them. *Belief* in the truth of God's word leads to personal rest and societal rest.

**Acts 14:3 - <sup>3</sup>So they stayed there a long time and spoke boldly for the Lord, who testified to the message of his grace by enabling them to do signs and wonders.**

The apostles had a decision to make. Would they stay or would they go? They had been in Antioch just before. They could probably see the writing on the wall. What we find in the book of Acts is that there isn't a one-size-fits-all answer to a situation like this. Even for Paul. Tension was mounting, how should they react? Well, this is their reaction: They spoke for the Lord and they did so boldly. Paul and Barnabas were gentle men, they were compassionate. But they were not timid. They weren't compromising. They spoke boldly. And what they spoke was all about *grace*. God's message to a hostile world is grace. And He was pleased when His servants spoke this way.

**Acts 14:4 - <sup>4</sup>But the people of the city were divided, some siding with the Jews and others with the apostles.**

How can you side against grace? It's hard to believe, but it happens. Then again, some people like Microsoft. A war was once fought between France and Mexico because a French cafe had been ransacked during looting in Mexico City and the government wouldn't pay for the damages. It's known as 'the pastry war' and you can look it up on [history.com](http://history.com).<sup>2</sup>

Tension had morphed into division. But note that the apostles didn't *fuel* the division. They were peacemakers. But, they didn't compromise. They didn't say, "Ok, we'll stop offending you." They held to their position, but their attitude, like Christ's, was, "You may be against us, but we are *for* you." Paul didn't want a fight. Grace never does. But truth can't be negotiated, even in an effort to make peace. All we can do is double down on the message and methods of grace. If people want to *refuse* that, fine. But we are still *for* them, because Christ is *for* them. He *died* for them. The Gospel is going to divide. Jesus said as much. But let division not be because of our failure to show grace.

**Acts 14:5-6 - <sup>5</sup>When an attempt was made by both the Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers, to mistreat and stone them, <sup>6</sup>they found out about it and fled to the Lycaonian towns of Lystra and Derbe and to the surrounding countryside.**

Satan was coordinating different divisions of his captive army to come against God's work. He had tried to discredit them in Cyprus, drive them out in Antioch, now to destroy them in Iconium, but Paul heard about it. This happened a lot to Paul. At least 4 times that we know of. Once when he had to escape the city in a basket. Once here. Once when a plot is laid against him while in Roman custody. And once when he's headed to Jerusalem and everyone keeps prophesying that he's going to be arrested.

But, here he had another decision to make in this increasingly hostile situation. What would he do? Should he stay? Should he run? Should he try to defend himself? Sometimes he ran. Sometimes he appealed to the laws of the land. Sometimes he pressed on, come what may.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.history.com/news/6-wars-fought-for-ridiculous-reasons>

We may not be facing violent persecution, but we are in midst of some very strenuous times. Whether it's COVID or the ongoing riots near and far, what should I do? There are a lot of options, a lot of them good. The *right* one is what we're after, though. And to figure that out we must be led by the Holy Spirit. So *be* led. Not by instagram. Not by facebook. Not by pundits. But by your God.

**Acts 14:7 - <sup>7</sup>There they continued preaching the gospel.**

They say insanity is doing the same thing over and over but expecting a different result. Paul and Barnabas aren't insane. They know that wherever they go they're going to face similar opposition. But they knew the Gospel was still the power of God unto salvation. It was the only hope.

If you want to solve racial turmoil in America, the answer is the Gospel. You can try to penalize or educate or incentivize or whatever other scheme humans try to come up with, but those are all bandaids on a cancer cell. It's possible they do some good on some level. But if you want to solve racism you need to transform racists. And only the Gospel can do that. But it *does*. What stands in the way of progress are those people who will not surrender and humble themselves and believe.

**Acts 14:8-9a - <sup>8</sup>In Lystra a man was sitting who was without strength in his feet, had never walked, and had been lame from birth. <sup>9</sup>He listened as Paul spoke.**

We've seen a scene like this one before when Peter and John were used to heal a Jewish man at the temple. Suffering is the same in Jerusalem or Lystra. There's need everywhere. But the good news is there's grace no matter where, no matter when. The message is the same for governors or cripples.

**Acts 14:9b-10 - After looking directly at him and seeing that he had faith to be healed, <sup>10</sup>Paul said in a loud voice, "Stand up on your feet!" And he jumped up and began to walk around.**

What do we put our faith in? A man? A system? A human ideology? This man believed in *Christ* and his life was forever changed. And there was an automatic response. He *immediately* had the ability to start "walking around."

We're called to walk with God. All our learning is on-the-job training. But, from the start, God invigorates and strengthens us as we trust Him and exercise our faith.

**Acts 14:11-12 - <sup>11</sup>When the crowds saw what Paul had done, they shouted, saying in the Lycaonian language, "The gods have come down to us in human form!" <sup>12</sup>Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker.**

Satan had tried to discredit them and drive them away, even destroy them. Now he tries something new: Let's *deify* them! But the apostles weren't going to take the bait.

It's sad to see the fog that lost people live in. These Galatians had a legend that Zeus and Hermes had come down once before and didn't like how they were treated so they killed everyone except 2 people.<sup>3</sup> So now they were trying to respond out of fear that it might happen again.

What a sad lie that the enemy had tricked them with. What was true? God *had* come down in the flesh. But He came to *seek* and to *save*. He came that we may have life and have it more abundantly.

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<sup>3</sup> William Barclay *The Acts of the Apostles*

He came so that the world might have justice and peace. As we seek these things in our own communities, let's not settle for less than the revelation of Scripture. We shouldn't settle for stop-gaps or lesser of two evils or things like that, but rather we should embrace the full truth revealed in Jesus Christ through the Scriptures.

**Acts 14:13 - <sup>13</sup>The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the town, brought bulls and wreaths to the gates because he intended, with the crowds, to offer sacrifice.**

We live in a world where things can change very quickly. That's been made very plain in the last few months. As Christians we need to learn to think on our feet. We don't always have a week to mull over our response. So, what can we do? We can live submitted to controlling principles of grace, humility, peace and truth. We are called to these things as God's people and should always keep them in operation. What should Paul and Barnabas do in this situation? Operate in grace. Grace which doesn't *condone* sin, but deals with it.

**Acts 14:14-15 - <sup>14</sup>The apostles Barnabas and Paul tore their robes when they heard this and rushed into the crowd, shouting: <sup>15</sup>“People! Why are you doing these things? We are people also, just like you, and we are proclaiming good news to you, that you turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heaven, the earth, the sea, and everything in them.**

The apostles were *very* distressed at what was happening. They tore their robes and these guys don't have extra clothes to spare. But even though they sensed great danger, they didn't respond aggressively or in anger. Still grace. But, *in that grace*, they point out that the ways of the world are “worthless things.”

You and I are being told over and over what we need to think, what we need to do, how we need to react to different situations. The Bible explains, clearly, that the ways of the world are worthless. And, finding himself in the midst of this mob, Paul wanted to make it clear that they were *Christian*. He didn't say, “People we identify with you! We understand why you're doing these wrong things!” No, there was an absolute difference and the apostles invited anyone who was willing to join in.

**Acts 14:16-17 - <sup>16</sup>In past generations he allowed all the nations to go their own way, <sup>17</sup>although he did not leave himself without a witness, since he did what is good by giving you rain from heaven and fruitful seasons and filling you with food and your hearts with joy.”**

The grace of God. We don't need to apologize for Jesus Christ. Perhaps if we have aligned ourselves with other groups or banners we do, but not for our Lord, the Helper and Sustainer of all things. Paul spoke to them not as a Jew, not as a Roman, but as a living witness of the Living God. He pointed out that creation displays the grace of God. Christians should display that grace too, without condoning evil and without withholding the truth.

**Acts 14:18 - <sup>18</sup>Even though they said these things, they barely stopped the crowds from sacrificing to them.**

A lot was happening. There were some earnest people in the crowd that day, caught up in a frenzy, but what they were doing was wrong. The Christians in the situation could simultaneously love these people and show them grace *while* calling out their wrongdoing. Paul was not going to participate in

their demonstration that day, but he did make it his goal to lead these people *out* of their wrong and into God's way.

**Acts 14:19 - <sup>19</sup>Some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and when they won over the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, thinking he was dead.**

Satan had sent anti-missionaries from town to town. For these enemies of the Gospel, it wasn't enough that Paul had been driven out of their cities. They wanted him dead. This startling turn of events drives home the warning that we should beware the crowd. Those who worship you one day may kill you the next.

Why didn't they kill Barnabas, too? All we can say is that God's people each face different sufferings and trials. We should empathize and comfort one another, but not demand everyone experience the same struggles I do before I legitimize them in my mind.

Paul's stoning triggers a powerful flashback for us, when he himself stood in agreement as Stephen suffered the same fate. Paul had been a cold and calculating killer. A butcher and terrorist. What did he need to become a better "person?" He needed to believe in Jesus Christ. When he did, everything changed. The whole *world* changed. And, there was still more for him to do.

**Acts 14:20 - <sup>20</sup>After the disciples gathered around him, he got up and went into the town. The next day he left with Barnabas for Derbe.**

In Disney's *Aladdin*, after trying to strand him in the cave of wonders and trying to drown him and blasting him to the ends of the earth, Jafar says in exasperation to Aladdin, "How many times do I have to kill you, boy?!?"

Satan must've felt a similar frustration. Paul stands up and goes *right back in* to the city. To those people who just murdered him. On the one hand, it seems he was fully healed, at least enough to walk and travel a long 60 miles starting the next day. On the other hand, Paul would later say in his letter to these Galatians, "I bear on my body the marks of Jesus." Some of those marks, perhaps, left by the very readers of the epistle.

Paul, we know, had once been used to work a miracle of judgment against the enemy of the Gospel. He struck Bar-Jesus blind. I suppose he could have here, but that wasn't his leading. Instead, just more grace.

We are being bombarded with messages about what we all "need" to be doing to respond to the strains and situations and unrest plaguing our communities right now. But the majority of it is generated from the minds of men who cannot fix what is really wrong in the human heart and therefore in human societies. What we all *actually* need to be doing is walking with God. Being led by Him in grace. He shows us how to proceed and then strengthens us to do it.

Our world is hurting. It's on the brink. It is desperately in need. The cure is the Gospel. That is what gives sight to the blind. Moves men from cheating to charity. Transforms Saul into Paul.

We aren't sent into the world to condemn it, but to help disentangle people trapped in darkness and sin. We do so through unfailing grace, indiscriminate love, and uncompromising truth, keeping to God's path, speaking boldly for the Lord, continuing, as usual, as *Christians*.