

A Survey of Mobs and Riots in Scripture

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A Survey of Mobs and Riots in Scripture

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First Edition

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Introduction

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Mobs and riots have been part of the human sociological landscape for millennia. They are certainly a part of the human experience in America.¹ The purpose of this work is to review the history of mobs and riots throughout Scripture and to make observations about how they were handled.

A mob is “a large or disorderly crowd especially one bent on riotous or destructive action.”² A riot is a form of civil unrest in which a group causes a public disturbance by destroying property and/or harming innocent people. A mob, though bent on destruction, may be hindered or neutralized by psychological dissuasion or the legitimate use of physical force. Both mobs and riots are found throughout Scripture. In the OT, the verb *קָהַל* *qahal* means “to assemble...to call

¹ In 2020, the United States witnessed riots across the country in cities such as Chicago, Kenosha, Minneapolis, New York, Philadelphia, and Portland. Social media websites have become popular platforms for online mobs—cyber bullies—whose victims are judged on worldly and rigid ideological grounds without facts or concern for outcomes.

² Merriam-Webster, “Mob” in *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 2003).

together, meet together.”³ Though commonly used of an assembly of people (Ex 35:1; 1 Ki 12:21; 1 Ch 13:5; 15:3), it is used in Jeremiah 26:9 to describe a mob who demanded Jeremiah’s death (Jer 26:11). Also, ἐκκλησία *ekklesia*, which in most instances denotes an “assembly...community, [or] congregation”⁴ is used in Acts 19:32, 41 to describe a mob. The word ὄχλος *ochlos* refers to a crowd, but denotes riotous behavior in Acts 14:19; 17:8; 21:34-35. The compound word ὀχλοποιέω *ochlopoieo*, is translated “form a mob”⁵ in Acts 17:5. The noun θόρυβος *thorubos* is used to describe a riot in Matthew 26:5; 27:24, and Mark 14:2, and the verb θορυβέω *thorubeo* describes moblike behavior in Acts 17:5. Lastly, the word στάσις *stasis*, which primarily means a standing, is used in Acts 19:40 to describe an “uprising, riot, revolt, rebellion.”⁶ In each of these occurrences, context determines the meaning of the word. It’s interesting that more riots were started against the apostle Paul than any other person in Scripture, as he was attacked in Philippi (Acts 16:19-24), Thessalonica (Acts 17:5-9), Ephesus (Acts 19:28-41), and Jerusalem (Acts 21:27-35).

Often there are corrupt individuals or groups who instigate a riot, either as a means of retaliation for some perceived injustice (real or imagined), or simply to cause disruption as a means of leveraging power within a community. For those leading the mob, it’s about intimidation and power and

³ Ludwig Koehler et al., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994–2000), 1078–1079.

⁴ William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 303.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 745.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 940.

forcing others to submit to their demands. Because rioters are often more emotional than rational, it becomes very difficult to restrain a mob except by physical force. This is why a well-trained and properly funded police force is necessary for civil peace.⁷

Operating from a biblical worldview, one would be remiss to ignore the spiritual forces at work behind the human activity, as Satan and his demonic forces promote acts of evil and violence against God's people and His divine institutions.⁸ The challenge for Christians is to strive to be Christlike in word and action. And, when faced with the hostility of a mob, resolve not to bow to the enemy when they employ intimidation tactics. God always knows when a believer will face a crisis, and He is faithful to provide wisdom and grace in each situation. Below are examples of mobs and riots in the Bible and how they were handled.

⁷ In 2020 in the United States, there was a push by many organizations to defund the police on the grounds that police organizations are systemically racist and need to be dismantled. Some who were pushing for this reduction in police are noted Marxists who appear to be using this tactic to cause disruption in order to leverage power within the community.

⁸ God has designed certain institutions to serve as the basis for personal and national stability. At a minimum, these include personal responsibility (Gen 1:27-28; 2:16-17), marriage (Gen 2:20-25; Col 3:18-21), family (Gen 1:28; 4:1-2; Eph 6:1-4), human government (Rom 13:1-6), and nations with sovereign borders (Acts 17:26-27).

Biblical Examples of Mobs and Riots and How They Were Handled

Example #1 - Lot and Sodom (Gen 19:1-25). Lot, while living in Sodom, had received some male guests (who were actually angels) that he welcomed into his home (Gen 19:1-3). However, there were sexual degenerates in the city who came to Lot's house and demanded he turn out his male guests so they could have sexual intercourse with them. It's likely these men intended to rape Lot's guests. The text tells us, "Before they went to bed, the men of the city of Sodom, both young and old, the whole population, surrounded the house" (Gen 19:4), saying, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Send them out to us so we can have sex with them!" (Gen 19:5).¹ Surrounding the house and making demands was an intimidation tactic designed to cause fear.

Lot tried to reason with them, saying, "Don't do this evil, my brothers" (Gen 19:7), even wrongly offering them his two daughters in place of his guests (Gen 19:8). According to Allen Ross, "The men wanted to exploit the visitors sexually, and Lot was willing to sacrifice his two daughters' virginity instead. Ironically, Lot offered them his daughters to do whatever seemed "good" (tôb) in their eyes, but even

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the Holman Christian Standard Bible®, Copyright © 1999, 2000, 2002, 2003, 2009 by Holman Bible Publishers. Used by permission.

this perverted good was rejected by those bent on evil.”² The men of the city then demanded Lot get out of their way, and “they put pressure on Lot and came up to break down the door” (Gen 19:9).

When the men of Sodom did not get what they wanted, they resorted to force and tried to break into Lot’s house. This mob would certainly have committed a great evil against Lot and his guests, but fortunately, “the angels reached out, brought Lot into the house with them, and shut the door” (Gen 19:10). Since the mob was not rational, the angels were required to use force, so “they struck the men who were at the entrance of the house, both young and old, with a blinding light so that they were unable to find the entrance” (Gen 19:11). The Hebrew verb נָכָה *nakah* “is often used for ‘hitting’ or ‘smiting’ an object with one, non-fatal strike.”³ The *blinding light* (סְנֵוֹרִים *sanverim*) is perhaps better understood as *sudden blindness*. This tactic used by the angels was sufficient to neutralize the attackers. Arnold Fruchtenbaum writes:

The Hebrew word for blindness here is not the normal word that is used. Outside this verse, this word for blindness is found only once elsewhere, in II Kings 6:18, which is also in the context of angels. This word refers to a partial blindness with mental

² Allen P. Ross, *Creation and Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), 360.

³ Marvin R. Wilson, “1364 נָכָה,” ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 578.

bewilderment; that is, mental confusion resulting from distorted vision.⁴

Here, we witness the angels employing a measured use of nonlethal force sufficient to stop the Sodomites from advancing. Of course, this was a temporary use of nonlethal force until such a time that God could render fatal judgment on the city as a whole (Gen 19:12-25).

Observations: First, Lot received divine assistance, being aided by angels who came to his defense. Lot was not equipped to handle the situation on his own, and others, more capable, had to step in and act on his behalf. Second, the angels used a nonlethal method of force to control the mob. Blinding the crowd was sufficient to deter them from advancing. Third, once the threat was neutralized, the angels then acted to get Lot and his willing family members out of the city. Once Lot and his family were removed from the hostile situation, God then rained down judgment upon the city and destroyed it (Gen 19:12-25).

Example #2 - Gideon and Baal (Judg 6:1-31). Gideon was a Judge in Israel who was called by God to deliver His people from Midianite oppressors who were attacking and raiding the cities and taking their food (Judg 6:1-24). Gideon was also called by God to tear down a pagan altar that was being used by Israelites to worship Baal and Asherah (Judg 6:25-27). Gideon's act of destroying the altar was a divine provocation against Israelites who had been wrongly engaging in idolatry.

⁴ Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *Ariel's Bible Commentary: The Book of Genesis*, 1st ed. (San Antonio, TX: Ariel Ministries, 2008), 323.

When the idolaters in the city woke the next the morning, “they found Baal’s altar torn down, and the Asherah pole beside it cut down” (Judg 6:28). After a short inquiry, the men of the city learned the altar to Baal had been destroyed by Gideon (Judg 6:29), so they went to Joash, Gideon’s father, and said, “Bring out your son. He must die, because he tore down Baal’s altar and cut down the Asherah pole beside it” (Judg 6:30). God’s Law for Israel required that pagan altars and idols be torn down and destroyed (Ex 34:13; Deut 7:5; Judg 2:2), and those who worshipped the idols were to be put to death (Deut 13:6-10). However, this account reveals how corrupt the Israelite community had become, as many were willing to defend Baal and kill God’s servant.

Like the previous illustration of Lot, surrounding the house was an intimidation tactic to cause fearful compliance. Pagan-minded Israelites were employing a pressure tactic against God’s servant. However, Gideon’s father, Joash, was not a man to be bullied. He was a man with strength of character. He defended his son, standing alone against the mob, saying, “Would you plead Baal’s case for him? Would you save him? Whoever pleads his case will be put to death by morning! If he is a god, let him plead his own case because someone tore down his altar” (Judg 6:31). Joash’s argument is solid. If Baal is a god, he should not need people to defend (רִיב *rib*) him and his altar so as to save him (יָשָׁא *yasha*) from Gideon’s attack. It could be that Joash’s argument persuaded the mob; however, it seems more likely that it was his threat of putting to death anyone who defended Baal that deterred the mob from advancing with their murderous intention against his son.

Observations: First, like the previous example with Lot, Gideon had someone come to his rescue. In this case, it was the help of Gideon’s father, Joash, who boldly confronted

the mob that wanted to kill his son. Second, Joash met a threat of force with a threat of force. He said to the mob, “Whoever pleads his [Baal’s] case will be put to death by morning!” In effect, Joash was promising to kill anyone who defended Baal and tried to harm his son. In this situation it took someone with a strong personality and a blunt rebuke to quiet the mob. Surely God, Who called Gideon to destroy the altar of Baal, used Joash as His instrument to defend Gideon. In the end Gideon was not harmed (Judg 6:32), and went on to serve as God’s leader in Israel to defeat their enemies (Judg 6:33—7:25).

Example #3 - Jeremiah in Jerusalem (Jer 26:1-24). God called Jeremiah, His prophet, to warn the people of Jerusalem that unless they turned back to God in obedience, He would destroy the temple and the city (Jer 26:1-2). Through His prophet Jeremiah, God said, “Perhaps they will listen and return—each from his evil way of life—so that I might relent concerning the disaster that I plan to do to them because of the evil of their deeds” (Jer 26:3).

As God’s people, the Judahites were under judgment because they had turned away from the Lord and were living like the pagan nations. If God’s people did not turn back to Him, as He instructed (Jer 26:4-5), then God said, “I will make this temple like Shiloh. I will make this city [Jerusalem] an object of cursing for all the nations of the earth” (Jer 26:6). The Israelites were furious with what Jeremiah had spoken, and when he finished delivering his speech (Jer 26:7-8a), “the priests, the prophets, and all the people took hold of him, yelling, ‘You must surely die!’” (Jer 26:8b). They further stated, “How dare you prophesy in the name of Yahweh, saying, ‘This temple will become like Shiloh and this city will become an uninhabited ruin!’ Then all the people assembled against Jeremiah at the LORD’s temple” (Jer 26:9). The word *assembled* translates the

Hebrew verb קהל *qahal* which means “to assemble...call together, meet together.”⁵ Though commonly used of an assembly of people (Ex 35:1; 1 Ki 12:21; 1 Ch 13:5; 15:3), it is used here in Jeremiah 26:9 to describe a mob that gathered around Jeremiah, grabbed him by force, and demanded his death (cf., Jer 26:11). Fortunately, some of the city officials heard about what was happening and “went from the king’s palace to the LORD’s temple and sat at the entrance of the New Gate” (Jer 26:10). Once there, they mediated the situation and listened to the demands of the crowd (Jer 26:11), as well as Jeremiah the prophet (Jer 26:12-13).

Jeremiah submitted to these leaders, saying, “As for me, here I am in your hands; do to me what you think is good and right” (Jer 26:14). However, Jeremiah was not passive, and he spoke up for himself, saying to the leaders, “But know for certain that if you put me to death, you will bring innocent blood on yourselves, on this city, and on its residents, for it is certain the LORD has sent me to speak all these things directly to you” (Jer 26:15). The leaders of Judah were persuaded by Jeremiah, and they spoke to the priests and prophets on Jeremiah’s behalf, saying, “This man doesn’t deserve the death sentence, for he has spoken to us in the name of Yahweh our God!” (Jer 26:16). Huey states, “To their credit the officials, now joined by the people, made the right decision. Jeremiah’s eloquent defense convinced them, at least for the moment, that his message was not worthy of his death. They rejected the accusation of the priests and prophets by acquitting Jeremiah of the charges.”⁶ These

⁵ Ludwig Koehler et al., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 1078–1079.

⁶ F. B. Huey, *Jeremiah, Lamentations*, vol. 16, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman &

governmental leaders defended Jeremiah, as they should have, (Jer 26:16-23), and “so he was not handed over to the people to be put to death” (Jer 26:24). Jeremiah’s life was saved from the mob that wanted to kill him.

Observations: First, Jeremiah, when attacked by the mob, had city officials come to his rescue. These officials modeled good government which intervened and mediated the situation in an orderly and rational manner, listening to both sides of the case before rendering judgment. Second, Jeremiah did not sit quietly, but defended himself before the city officials, declaring that he was innocent. Third, Jeremiah brought God into the discussion, saying, “it is certain the LORD has sent me to speak all these things directly to you.” Here is an example of a believer thinking divine viewpoint, and bringing God into the discussion with the city’s leaders. This made the leaders aware that whatever they did, it was not just against Jeremiah, but against God who called him.

Example # 4 - Jesus in Nazareth (Luke 4:14-30). Early in Jesus’ earthly ministry, when He was becoming more widely known, He was entering and teaching in synagogues and having discussions with His fellow Jews (Luke 4:14-15). When Jesus came to Nazareth, “As usual, He entered the synagogue on the Sabbath day and stood up to read” (Luke 4:16). After reading from the scroll of Isaiah (Luke 4:17-20), He identified Himself as the One whom Isaiah had written about, saying, “Today as you listen, this Scripture has been fulfilled” (Luke 4:21). At the beginning of His address, “They were all speaking well of Him and were amazed by the gracious words that came from His mouth” (Luke 4:22). However, Jesus went on to reveal His hearers would reject

Holman Publishers, 1993), 238.

Him (Luke 4:23), and that “no prophet is welcome in his hometown” (Luke 4:24). Jesus then cited two OT examples where God’s prophets—Elijah and Elisha—turned to Gentiles and demonstrated kindness (Luke 4:23-27). Jesus pointed out that Elijah had helped a Gentile widow in Sidon (1 Ki 17:8-16), and Elisha healed Naaman, a Syrian Gentile of his leprosy (2 Ki 5:1-15). This was a blow to Jewish exceptionalism, as Jesus revealed God’s goodness toward women, Gentiles, and lepers, three groups of people who were regarded by Jesus’ hearers to be at the bottom of Jewish society. Like many OT prophets, Jesus too would be rejected by recalcitrant Israelites and He would turn to the Gentiles.

This message upset Jesus’ hearers and their pride was wounded. “When they heard this, everyone in the synagogue was enraged. They got up, drove Him out of town, and brought Him to the edge of the hill that their town was built on, intending to hurl Him over the cliff” (Luke 4:28-29). Here was a religious and murderous mob that intended to kill Jesus, and He permitted Himself to be driven by them to a certain place. Surely, the mob handled Him roughly as they went through the town and to the edge of the hill where they intended to kill Him. However, once at the edge of the hill, He did not permit them to go any further. Luke informs us, “But He passed right through the crowd and went on His way” (Luke 4:30). It was not the Father’s time for Jesus to die, so a way of escape was provided.

Observations: Here, a hostile crowd had taken offense at Jesus’ teaching, perhaps because it accused them of rejecting Messiah, thus wounding their pride. Rather than operate by humility and reason, they formed a mob and were ready to kill Him by throwing Him off a cliff. Jesus permitted Himself to be driven by the mob to a certain point; however, because it was not the Father’s time for Jesus to die, Jesus was able to walk away from the dangerous situation. Though

the text does not say, divine intervention seems to be the reason Jesus was spared.

Example #5 - Jesus Before Pilate (Matt 27:1-26). By the end of Jesus' earthly ministry, we have an example of how the religious leadership in Jerusalem manipulated a crowd in order to help bring about Jesus' crucifixion. In the Gospel of Matthew, we are informed that "all the chief priests and the elders of the people plotted against Jesus to put Him to death. [And] after tying Him up, they led Him away and handed Him over to Pilate, the [Roman] governor" (Matt 27:1-2). And when Jesus was brought before Pilate, He did not defend Himself against the charges because He knew His hour had come for Him to be crucified according to the Father's will (Matt 27:10-14; cf. John 7:30; 8:20; 12:23, 27; 13:1; 17:1; Acts 2:22-23; 4:25-28).

Pilate, knowing the Jews were operating on envy and hatred tried to dissuade the mob from demanding Jesus' death. As a possible solution, Pilate offered to release Barabbas, a violent criminal, in place of Jesus (Matt 27:15-19). The "chief priests and the elders, however, persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to execute Jesus" (Matt 27:20). Here we observe corrupt leaders stirring up a mob as a pressure tactic to gain power. Pilate tried to defend Jesus by reasoning with the mob (Matt 27:21-23a), "But they kept shouting, 'Crucify Him!' all the more" (Matt 27:23).

The pressure of the mob had its intended effect, and the result was a breakdown in justice, for "When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that a riot was starting instead, he took some water, washed his hands in front of the crowd, and said, 'I am innocent of this man's blood. See to it yourselves!'" (Matt 27:24). Pilate became aware that he could not reason with the crowd and realized a riot (*θόρυβος* *thorubos*) was about to take place.

Pilate was no novice when it came to mobs and riots. Wright correctly states, “Pilate had commanded troops. He had sent them to quell riots before and could do so again. He didn’t have to be pushed around. But, like all bullies, he was also a coward. He lurches from trying to play the high and mighty judge to listening a little too much to the growing noise of the crowd.”⁷ The battle of the wills was over. Pilate had surrendered to the mob. The Jewish crowd took full responsibility for Jesus’ trial and death, saying, “His blood be on us and on our children!” (Matt 27:25). But this was not their place to act this way, as they had no legitimate authority to make this sort of demand. However, Pilate caved in, and “after having Jesus flogged, he handed Him over to be crucified” (Matt 27:26).

Observations: The religious leaders of Israel acted corruptly against Jesus, their Messiah, tied Him up and led Him away to Pilate, the Roman Governor. Pilate saw what was happening and tried to quiet the mob by offering to release a corrupt criminal named Barabbas in place of Jesus. But the Jewish leadership wanted Jesus crucified, so they manipulated the mob to start shouting for Jesus to be crucified. Surprisingly, Jesus was not distracted by the hostility of the corrupt leadership, nor the demands of the mob, but remained focused on doing the Father’s will. Divine viewpoint strengthened Jesus to face his hostile attackers. Pilate, however, was moved by the pressure of the crowd and caved in to their unjust demands. In all this, God was sovereignly in control and permitted the mob to be used for His greater glory, as the breakdown of Jewish and Roman

⁷ Tom Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part 2: Chapters 16-28* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 179.

jurisprudence was used to bring about Jesus' atoning death on the cross (Acts 2:22-24; 4:27-28). This was the Father's will.

Example #6 - The Stoning of Stephen (Acts 6:8—7:60). Early in the development of the Church, Luke records the account of a mob that stoned Stephen to death. Stephen is described as a man “full of faith and the Holy Spirit” (Acts 6:5). Luke also tells us he was “full of grace and power, [and] was performing great wonders and signs among the people” (Acts 6:8). But Stephen had men who opposed him, “some from what is called the Freedmen’s Synagogue...came forward and disputed with Stephen” (Acts 6:9). Though these men argued with Stephen, “they were unable to stand up against his wisdom and the Spirit by whom he was speaking” (Acts 6:10). Being immoral men, they began to tell lies about Stephen, persuading others, saying, “We heard him speaking blasphemous words against Moses and God!” (Acts 6:11). Unfortunately, these lies “stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes; so they came, dragged him off, and took him to the Sanhedrin” (Acts 6:12). *Stirred up* (συγκινέω *sugkineo*) is a hapax legomenon that means “They shook the people together like an earthquake.”⁸ Emotion follows thought, and here heated emotions were stirred by lies. The attackers also presented false witnesses to testify against Stephen, saying, “This man does not stop speaking blasphemous words against this holy place and the law. For we heard him say that Jesus, this Nazarene, will destroy this place and change the customs that Moses handed down to us” (Acts 6:13-14). Another lie.

⁸ A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1933), Acts 6:12.

How did Stephen respond to this mob and their false charges? He verbally defended himself against the false charges. Stephen gave an impromptu and selective overview of Israel's history (recalled from memory), in which he revealed their pattern of rejecting God's chosen leaders, referencing Joseph, Moses and finally, Jesus (Acts 7:1-50).⁹ Stephen defended himself based on a biblical worldview, citing Scripture as the basis for his argument. Many of the religious Israelites of Stephen's day presented themselves as the keepers and defenders of the Mosaic Law, yet they actually perverted it to protect their place of power and religious authority and were willing to destroy God's true servants when their self-interest and theological presuppositions were threatened. Stephen saw past their charade and knew the real issue behind their false accusations, and speaking boldly, he said:

You stiff-necked people with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are always resisting the Holy Spirit; as your ancestors did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They even killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become. You received the law under the direction of angels and yet have not kept it (Acts 7:51-53).

Stephen called them out on their hypocrisy and corruption,

⁹ In this context I'm reminded of the words of Jesus, who told His disciples, "Whenever they bring you before synagogues and rulers and authorities, don't worry about how you should defend yourselves or what you should say. For the Holy Spirit will teach you at that very hour what must be said" (Luke 12:11-12).

and “When they heard these things, they were enraged in their hearts and gnashed their teeth at him” (Acts 7:54). But Stephen did not react in kind; rather, he committed himself to the Lord. “But Stephen, filled by the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven. He saw God’s glory, with Jesus standing at the right hand of God, and he said, ‘Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!’” (Acts 7:55-56). This further incited his audience, and “they screamed at the top of their voices, covered their ears, and together rushed against him. They threw him out of the city and began to stone him. And the witnesses laid their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul” (Acts 7:57-58).

Stephen did not have a way of escape, and rather than reacting with violence, he committed himself to the Lord. Luke wrote, “They were stoning Stephen as he called out: ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!’ Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not charge them with this sin!’ And saying this, he fell asleep” (Acts 7:59-60). Stephen’s words and actions modeled the humility and love Jesus displayed toward His enemies while being crucified (Luke 23:34, 46).¹⁰ In this situation, God permitted this mob to have their sinful way, and used this as the means of bringing His servant home to heaven. Jesus did not rescue Stephen from death, but sustained him by means of the Holy

¹⁰ The apostle Peter communicates this same truth when he wrote, “For you were called to this, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in His steps. He did not commit sin, and no deceit was found in His mouth; when He was reviled, He did not revile in return; when He was suffering, He did not threaten but entrusted Himself to the One who judges justly.” (1 Pet 2:21-23)

Spirit (Acts 6:10) and stood in approval of his message and welcomed him as the first Christian martyr into heaven. The record of Stephen's life was that he was a good man, full of faith, who helped the needy and preached the gospel.

Observations: In this account, Stephen's ministry came to an abrupt end when he was murdered for preaching God's Word with clarity and passion. Stephen, being sustained by the Holy Spirit and the Word of God, defended himself against the false charges brought against him, arguing from a biblical worldview and citing Scripture as the basis for his argument, calling out his attackers on their hypocrisy and corruption. When attacked by the mob (with no way out), Stephen committed himself to the Lord, fell to his knees and prayed for them, asking they be forgiven for their sin. In this way, Stephen modeled the humility and love Jesus displayed toward His enemies while He was crucified. It was a gross injustice that Stephen died a violent death at the hands of wicked men; however, the God of heaven stands as "Judge of all the earth" (Gen 18:25), and will see to it that divine retribution is rendered in His way and His time (Rom 12:17-19).

Example #7 - Paul and Silas in Philippi (Acts 16:16-40). In this pericope we have an example of a mob attacking and beating Paul and Silas because their ministry threatened the economic livelihood of craftsmen who made idols. Luke, the author of Acts, records, "Once, as we were on our way to prayer, a slave girl met us who had a spirit of prediction. She made a large profit for her owners by fortune-telling" (Acts 16:16). Luke reveals the slave girl followed Paul and his companions, saying, "These men, who are proclaiming to you the way of salvation, are the slaves of the Most High

God” (Acts 16:17), and that “she did this for many days” (Acts 16:17a).¹¹

This slave girl’s behavior irritated Paul, with the result that “Paul was greatly aggravated, and turning to the spirit, said, ‘I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her!’ And it came out right away” (Acts 16:18). Though Paul’s actions removed the irritant, it caused another situation to arise, for “When her owners saw that their hope of profit was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to the authorities” (Acts 16:19). Here is an example where “the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil” (1 Tim 6:10). The loss of their future financial wellbeing influenced them to violence, and “Bringing them before the chief magistrates, they said, ‘These men are seriously disturbing our city. They are Jews and are promoting customs that are not legal for us as Romans to adopt or practice’” (Acts 16:20-21). Of course, this was a lie, but they did not care about truth, only protecting their income.

Luke records, “Then the mob joined in the attack against them, and the chief magistrates stripped off their clothes and ordered them to be beaten with rods. After they had inflicted many blows on them, they threw them in jail, ordering the jailer to keep them securely guarded” (Acts 16:22-23). *The*

¹¹ It could be the demon was trying to provoke Paul to cast it out, thus depriving the slave girl’s owners of their economic wellbeing, and prompting them to force Paul out of town by means of violence. Satan and demons surely understand human psychology and social behavioral customs such that they can instigate mobs and riots when it serves their purposes.

mob (ὁ ὄχλος) is literally *the crowd*; however, the context describes moblike behavior; hence, the CSB translation.

It's a sad commentary when city officials, who should have upheld law and order, actually joined the mob in their violence against innocent men. It's interesting that God did not stop their unjust and violent behavior, but used it as an opportunity to have Paul and Silas placed into a jail where they shared the gospel with a jailer who came to faith in Jesus and was saved, along with his household (Acts 16:24-34). But the very next morning, "the chief magistrates sent the police to say, 'Release those men!'" (Acts 16:35). And the chief jailer told Paul and Silas, "The magistrates have sent orders for you to be released. So come out now and go in peace" (Acts 16:36). But Paul refused to let the illegality of the situation go unaddressed, saying, "They beat us in public without a trial, although we are Roman citizens, and threw us in jail. And now are they going to smuggle us out secretly? Certainly not! On the contrary, let them come themselves and escort us out!" (Acts 16:37).

Paul and Silas had rights as Roman citizens and were justified in claiming those rights when treated illegally. "Then the police reported these words to the magistrates. They were afraid when they heard that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens. So they came and apologized to them, and escorting them out, they urged them to leave town" (Acts 16:38-39). The Philippian magistrates were like many who operate primarily from power and only respect those who have power themselves and are not afraid to use it.¹² Though

¹² Paul exercised his legal rights on another occasion when he was facing an unjust trial and was in danger of physical harm in which he appealed to Caesar, hoping to gain a just trial (see Acts 25:7-12).

the Philippian magistrates urged Paul and Silas to leave town, they did not do so right away, but first “came to Lydia’s house where they saw and encouraged the brothers, and [then] departed” (Acts 16:40). Paul and Silas stayed focused on their Christian ministry and were not deterred by the hostility of the city’s residents nor their corrupt leaders.

Observations: In this account, Paul and Silas had been falsely accused of breaking the law by residents of Philippi who were threatened economically by Paul and Silas’ ministry. The accusers, along with a mob and city magistrates, had Paul and Silas stripped, beaten with rods and thrown into jail. The next morning, when Paul and Silas had opportunity, they exercised their rights as Roman citizens, demanding the city magistrates come and escort them out. The city magistrates were then fearful, knowing they’d acted inappropriately by mistreating those who had rights under Roman Law.

Example #8 – Paul and Silas in Thessalonica (Acts 17:1-9). Right after Paul and Silas left Philippi, having experience mob violence there, “they traveled through Amphipolis and Apollonia and came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue” (Acts 17:1). Luke informs us, “As usual, Paul went to the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and showing that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead, saying: ‘This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah’” (Acts 17:2-3). Paul’s teaching was having a positive impact, and “some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, including a great number of God-fearing Greeks, as well as a number of the leading women” (Acts 17:4).

Some of the unbelieving Jews in the synagogue felt threatened by Paul’s success in persuading people to turn to

Christ and they “became jealous” (Acts 17:5a). Being motivated by sinful jealousy, “they brought together some scoundrels from the marketplace, formed a mob, and started a riot in the city” (Acts 17:5b). *A mob* translates the Greek verb ὀχλοποιέω *ochlopoieo*, a hapax legomenon, which literally means “making or getting a crowd.”¹³ These Jewish synagogue leaders operated with intentionality as they picked *scoundrels* (πονηρός *poneros* – *wicked, evil, degenerate men*) with the sole intention of starting “a riot in the city.” *A riot* translates the Greek verb θορυβέω *thorubeo*, which means to “throw into disorder...disturb, agitate”¹⁴

Here we see hot emotions directing aggressive behavior. The result was that the mob sought an outlet of destruction, and “Attacking Jason’s house, they searched for them to bring them out to the public assembly” (Acts 17:5c). Jason was the one hosting Paul and Silas while they were in Thessalonica. But when the attackers could not find Paul and Silas, “they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city officials” (Acts 17:6a). This mob assumed authority to drag Jason and others before the city council (πολιτάρχης *politarches*). And when they came before the city officials, they came *shouting* at them. The Greek verb βοάω *boao* means “to use one’s voice at high volume, call, shout, cry out...of emotionally charged cries”¹⁵

The tactic of this mob was to overpower the city officials with their sudden presence and high volume. And their

¹³ A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, Ac 17:5.

¹⁴ William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 458.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 180.

argument was, “These men who have turned the world upside down have come here too, and Jason has received them as guests! They are all acting contrary to Caesar’s decrees, saying that there is another king—Jesus!” (Acts 17:6b-7). The charge was that Paul and Silas were known as troublemakers elsewhere in the world, and that one of the city residents, Jason, had received them as guests, implying his guilt. The charge also included sedition, saying that Paul and Silas were lawbreakers, violating Caesar’s decree, and advocating for another king, Jesus.

The tactic of the mob worked. The result was, “The Jews stirred up the crowd and the city officials who heard these things. So taking a security bond from Jason and the others, they released them” (Acts 17:8-9). Here, the city officials failed to handle the matter properly, allowing themselves to be caught up in the emotional fervor and acting without proper investigation. Not finding Paul or Silas, the city officials took a security bond from Jason and then let them go. Toussaint writes, “Probably the bond-posting was to guarantee that Paul and Silas would leave town and not return. If more trouble arose, Jason and the others would lose their money. This may explain why Paul was prohibited from returning (1 Th 2:18).”¹⁶

Observations: Having previously experienced mob violence in Philippi, Paul and Silas were not deterred from their ministry and continued to advance the gospel of grace, this time in Thessalonica. As was his practice, Paul went to the Jew first and shared the gospel in the local synagogue

¹⁶ Stanley D. Toussaint, “Acts,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 401.

(Rom 1:16). The result was that many were coming to faith in Christ, including Jews, Gentiles, and prominent women in the city. However, some of the Jewish leaders in the synagogue felt threatened by the exodus of members and they resorted to evil tactics to protect their remaining congregation. Their strategy was to partner with some unethical men from the marketplace and form a mob and start a riot. Creating a crisis gave them the necessary leverage to deal with the perceived threat that Paul and Silas posed. When they could not find Paul and Silas, they attacked Jason—Paul’s host—and dragged him before the city officials with false charges of sedition. Their strategy worked. The city officials forced Jason to provide a security bond—presumably a large amount of money—that guaranteed Paul and Silas would not return to the city.

Example #9 - Paul in Ephesus (Acts 19:21—20:1). Paul had received a positive response when he preached the gospel in Ephesus and many were believing in Jesus as Savior and turning away from their idolatry. In Acts 19:21-41, we learn that Paul’s preaching had a social and economic impact, and those who felt financially threatened formed a mob and sought to harm him and his companions. Luke informs us, “During that time there was a major disturbance about the Way” (Acts 19:23). The disturbance was started by a man named Demetrius, “a silversmith who made silver shrines of Artemis, [and] provided a great deal of business for the craftsmen” (Acts 19:24). After gathering his fellow craftsmen together, Demetrius told them:

Men, you know that our prosperity is derived from this business. You both see and hear that not only in Ephesus, but in almost all of Asia, this man Paul has persuaded and misled a considerable number of people by saying that gods made by hand are not gods! So not only do we run a risk that our business

may be discredited, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis may be despised and her magnificence come to the verge of ruin—the very one all of Asia and the world adore. (Acts 19:25-27).

The appeal of Demetrius was first economic (Acts 19:25), and then theological (Acts 19:27). Money and religion are often tied together, and a threat to one is a threat to the other. Wiersbe states, “Paul did not arouse the opposition of the silversmiths by picketing the temple of Diana or staging anti-idolatry rallies. All he did was teach the truth daily and send out his converts to witness to the lost people in the city. As more and more people got converted, fewer and fewer customers were available.”¹⁷

Demetrius’ message had its desired effect, for “When they had heard this, they were filled with rage and began to cry out, ‘Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!’” (Act 19:28). Their rage and shouting infected others who turned to violence, “So the city was filled with confusion, and they rushed all together into the amphitheater, dragging along Gaius and Aristarchus, Macedonians who were Paul’s traveling companions” (Acts 19:29). Paul wanted to go into the amphitheater and defend the gospel message and his companions, but was prohibited by his friends (Acts 19:30). Luke records, “Even some of the provincial officials of Asia, who were his friends, sent word to him, pleading with him not to take a chance by going into the amphitheater” (Acts 19:31).

One wonders why some of these “provincial officials” did

¹⁷ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), Acts 19:21–41.

not exercise their authority and stop the mob from its violence. Perhaps they were intimidated. The riot grew in intensity, as “some were shouting one thing and some another, because the assembly was in confusion, and most of them did not know why they had come together” (Acts 19:32). This would have been laughable, except for the possibility of serious harm that Paul’s companions faced at the hands of this angry mob.

At one point, there was a man named Alexander, who was pushed to the front of the crowd to give advice (Acts 19:33). However, when the crowd “recognized that he was a Jew, a united cry went up from all of them for about two hours: ‘Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!’” (Acts 19:34). Not only do we observe antisemitism, but more shouting from a highly emotional group. After the crowd had run out of energy, the city clerk began to reason with them (Acts 19:35-36a), saying, “you must keep calm and not do anything rash. For you have brought these men here who are not temple robbers or blasphemers of our goddess” (Acts 19:36b-37).

One can imagine Paul’s two friends, Gaius and Aristarchus, were afraid for their lives during this time and were perhaps relieved when the city clerk began to calm the crowd and reason with them, saying, “if Demetrius and the craftsmen who are with him have a case against anyone, the courts are in session, and there are proconsuls. Let them bring charges against one another. But if you want something else, it must be decided in a legal assembly” (Acts 19:38-39). The matter should have been handled in the courts from the beginning. He also told them, “we run a risk of being charged with rioting for what happened today, since there is no justification that we can give as a reason for this disorderly gathering” (Acts 19:40). The word *rioting* translates the Greek word στάσις *stasis*, which primarily means *a standing*, but is here use to describe an “uprising, riot, revolt,

rebellion.”¹⁸ The mob had to run out of steam before reason could be applied to the situation, and then the crowd dispersed (Acts 19:41). Afterwards, Paul left the city for Macedonia (Acts 20:1).

Observations: In this situation, Paul had received a positive response to the gospel message when he was in Ephesus. The result was that many people in the city were turning from their idols and sorcery and serving Christ. However, the social and economic impact touched the local craftsmen who felt financially threatened. A leader by the name of Demetrius gathered his fellow craftsmen and stirred them up, forming a mob, and dragging two innocent companions of Paul into an amphitheater, where the crowd shouted for two hours, causing confusion, even forgetting why they had gathered in the first place. Eventually, after the crowd ran out of steam, a city clerk was able to address them reasonably, advising they bring their charges to the courts if anyone had a legal case. Because there was no strong leadership with the means to quiet the mob, the rioters had to wear themselves out before a city official could reason with the people and diffuse the situation.

Example #10 - Paul in Jerusalem (Acts 21:17—22:30). In this account Paul had returned to Jerusalem and visited with some of the elders of the church (Acts 21:17-20), who informed him there were false rumors being spread about him, that he was teaching “all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to abandon Moses, by telling them not to circumcise

¹⁸ William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 940.

their children or to walk in our customs” (Acts 21:21).¹⁹

Being concerned about Paul’s return and the possible problems it might cause, the church elders advised him to partner with “four men who have obligated themselves with a vow” (Acts 21:23). They told Paul, “Take these men, purify yourself along with them, and pay for them to get their heads shaved. Then everyone will know that what they were told about you amounts to nothing, but that you yourself are also careful about observing the law” (Acts 21:24). They thought this would correct any false ideas people had about Paul and assuage their fears. The elders would also advocate for Paul concerning the Gentiles who had believed, saying, “we have written a letter containing our decision that they should keep themselves from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from what is strangled, and from sexual immorality” (Act 21:25).

Wanting to keep the peace, Paul complied with their request and the very next day “took the men, having purified himself along with them, and entered the temple, announcing the completion of the purification days when the offering for

¹⁹ Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has value before God for those under the New Covenant (1 Cor 7:19; Gal 5:16). This is also true of other matters that the Mosaic Law commanded or prohibited (such as animal sacrifices, keeping the Sabbath, dietary laws, feasts, etc.; see Rom 14:14-21; 1 Cor 8:8-13). By grace, believers could either abstain or observe the Mosaic Law. It was a matter of conscience and tradition. However, if they chose to observe the Law, they should never regard it as a means of salvation (Rom 3:28-30; 5:1-2; Gal 2:16, 20-21; 3:26), nor a way to be spiritual. Only the life of faith under the New Covenant pleases the Lord (Heb 7:19; 11:6).

each of them would be made” (Acts 21:26).²⁰ When possible, Paul accommodated others if it created an open door to share Christ (1 Cor 9:19-23). Next, we learn:

As the seven days were about to end, the Jews from Asia saw him in the temple complex, stirred up the whole crowd, and seized him, shouting, “Men of Israel, help! This is the man who teaches everyone everywhere against our people, our law, and this place. What’s more, he also brought Greeks into the temple and has profaned this holy place.” (Acts 21:27-28)

These men stirred up the crowd with false charges and physically seized Paul. They also made some false assumptions, “For they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian in the city with him, and they supposed that Paul had brought him into the temple complex” (Acts 21:29). The result was, “The whole city was stirred up, and the people rushed together. They seized Paul, dragged him out of the temple complex, and at once the gates were shut” (Acts 21:30). This mob resorted to violence and were beating Paul, but “As they were trying to kill him, word went up to the commander of the regiment that all Jerusalem was in chaos. Taking along soldiers and centurions, he immediately ran down to them. Seeing the commander and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul” (Acts 21:31-32). This is an example of a mob that was quelled only by the use of force. The mob

²⁰ This was likely a Nazarite vow, which was voluntary, temporary, and required the person to abstain from wine (and grapes and raisins), not cut his hair, and have no contact with the dead (or anyone who has). After completion of the vow, there were to be sacrifices of a lamb, ram, and grain and drink offering (Num 6:13-17).

violence against Paul was stopped only because they feared the Romans.

The Roman commander arrested Paul and tried to assess the situation by questioning him (Acts 21:33). But while he was trying to get information, “Some in the mob were shouting one thing and some another. Since he was not able to get reliable information because of the uproar, he ordered him to be taken into the barracks” (Acts 21:34). *The mob* here translates the Greek noun ὄχλος *ochlos*, which commonly refers to *a crowd*, but is used here and in verse 35 to describe violent moblike behavior. But even getting Paul out of the situation proved difficult, for “When Paul got to the steps, he had to be carried by the soldiers because of the mob’s violence, for the mass of people followed, yelling, ‘Take him away!’” (Acts 21:35-36).

Paul requested the Roman commander allow him to address the crowd, which he was permitted to do (Acts 21:35-40), and Paul gave a defense of his ministry (Acts 22:1-20). The crowd listened to Paul until he mentioned his ministry to the Gentiles (Acts 22:21), and that suddenly set them off. Luke records, “Then they raised their voices, shouting, ‘Wipe this person off the earth—it’s a disgrace for him to live!’” (Acts 22:22). The Roman commander saw things were getting out of control again, and as the mob “were yelling and flinging aside their robes and throwing dust into the air, the commander ordered him to be brought into the barracks, directing that he be examined with the scourge, so he could discover the reason they were shouting against him like this” (Acts 22:23-24).

As Paul was about to be flogged—which might have killed him or crippled him for life—he defended himself by revealing he was a Roman citizen, which guaranteed his rights under Roman law (Acts 22:25-27). Claudius Lysias,

the Roman commander, revealed he'd purchased his Roman citizenship by means of a large payment; however, Paul was born a Roman citizen (Acts 22:28).²¹ Luke states, "Therefore, those who were about to examine him withdrew from him at once. The commander too was alarmed when he realized Paul was a Roman citizen and he had bound him" (Acts 22:29). In this situation, Paul defended himself by exercising his legal rights as a Roman citizen in order to avoid unwarranted suffering or premature death.²²

Observations: In this record, Paul had returned to Jerusalem and met with the elders of the church, who advised him to go to the temple and support some local men who had taken a vow. This was done to try to alleviate some false rumors that had spread about Paul. However, some Jews from Asia spread lies about Paul bringing Gentiles into the temple courtyard, and this resulted in a riot that would have led to Paul's death if a Roman commander had not intervened with his soldiers. Here, strong leadership and physical force were necessary to protect Paul from a violent mob. However, the same leadership decided to have Paul flogged in an effort to get information out of him as to why his fellow Jews wanted

²¹ Paul's Roman citizenship—which he had by birth—was perhaps obtained by his father or grandfather who may have performed a benefit for a Roman official. A born citizen carried more respect than those who purchased citizenship, because it was conferred by respect rather than payment of money. Falsifying Roman citizenship was punishable by death.

²² Paul knew his Christian walk would be coupled with suffering (Acts 9:15-16; cf. 2 Cor 11:23-30), and he was willing to bear the marks of persecution (Gal 6:17), and was even willing to die for the cause of Christ if necessary (Acts 21:13).

to kill him. And like other occasions, Paul defended himself by exercising his legal rights as a Roman citizen.

Conclusion

Mobs and riots are nothing new to human experience. What the Scriptures reveal is that sometimes they are the result of a larger reality that includes God, angels, demons, believers and unbelievers. Sometimes the conflicts arise when cherished but faulty theological ideas and livelihoods are threatened by the believer who advances the gospel of grace. Biblically, there is no example of a believer doing God's will by means of forming a mob and starting a riot. Such ill behavior is indicative of those who operate on sinful values.

When encountering a mob, there may be times when God will supernaturally intervene and protect us, such as with Lot. Sometimes He will raise up another to defend us, such as with Gideon. But there may also be times we will face injury like Paul and Silas, or perhaps a martyr's death, like Stephen. Whether God chooses to rescue us in the moment of potential harm or not, we are called to stand firm wearing the full armor of God. When possible, we should demand our rights under the law as citizens of whichever country we happen to live. It is biblical to do so.

As Christians living in a fallen world, we are under divine orders to share the gospel and biblical teaching with the hope that others will turn to God (Mark 16:15; 2 Tim 4:2). By such activity, Christians disrupt Satan's kingdom of darkness as people respond to God's Word and are rescued (Col 1:13-14). Biblically, we know the majority in this world will not turn to Christ (Matt 7:13-14) but will be hostile to Him and to His people (John 15:18-19). As Christians, we are called to love our enemies and to pray for those who persecute us

(Luke 6:27-28).

Lastly, when sharing God's Word with others, it's helpful to know that not everyone wants to hear God's truth, and even though we may not agree with them, their personal choices should be respected (Matt 10:14; Acts 13:50-51). We should never try to force the gospel or Bible teaching on anyone, but be willing to share when opportunity presents itself. At times this will bring peace, and other times cause disruption and may even offend. The worldly-minded person will often try to control the content of every conversation, leading the Christian to talk only about worldly issues, as Scripture threatens his pagan presuppositions. We must not yield to him. Having the biblical worldview, the Christian should insert himself into daily conversations with others, and in so doing, be a light in a dark place. The Christian should strive to be respectful, conversational, and never have a fist-in-your-face attitude, as arrogance never helps advance biblical truth (2 Tim 2:24-26). The worldly-minded person may not want to hear what the Christian has to say, but he should never be under the false impression that he has the right to quiet the Christian and thereby exclude him from the conversation.

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