

Storyteller GEORGE HUTTAR tells the story of Paul being stoned in Lystra, Acts 14:8-20. Read also Habakkuk 2:18-3:2, 17-19

Harry Eyres writes that an art exhibit called *The Sacred Made Real* at London's National Gallery drew record crowds. Rooms displaying the Spanish art from the 17th Century were "full to bursting." He went back twice himself, he writes in an article entitled "Ennobled by Suffering."¹ Two pieces particularly impacted him, one of St. Serapion after having been martyred by pirates; disemboweled and hung between two poles, yet on his face is a sense of peace and grandeur that simply belies the reality of his horrible death.

The second picture is of St. Francis, who, although raised in a luxurious life of wealth left all that worldliness, exchanged clothes with a beggar, and began his spiritual quest. He lived very close to Christ, and experienced periods of transfixing ecstasy, as displayed in this picture. Even his cadaver is represented in an amazing expression of ecstasy.²

When people believe in Christ so deeply that their commitment withstands physical suffering, others take note. Such devotion is highly impactful.

We heard the story so beautifully told by George Huttar. As George learned the story, I am sure he imagined himself being there; standing strong; withstanding the worst abuse. Surely Paul had many thoughts as the crowd came against him, stoning him, thoughts like, *is this what I signed up for? Have I been sent here just to suffer and die? Is God paying me back for all my sins? Has God abandoned me?*

Have you ever been in the midst of a crowd where "crowd" mentality took over? Sometimes that happens at concerts and people are injured. Paul tried to talk to the crowd, but with little impact. This sort of riot would occur many times over the course of Paul's ministry. Later Paul would describe it like this:

"We do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, of the affliction we experienced in Asia; for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself" (2 Cor. 1:8).

Paul and Barnabas always went first to the Jews to share the good news. Familiar territory. But then they spoke to the Gentiles, a culture with whom they were not so familiar. Greeks believed in multiple gods and so they really did not have any concept of Judeo-Christian values. But Paul connected well with them, and I think he did a stellar job.

It might be like us talking to someone of the Muslim faith who has very little concept of a God when became incarnate, who is accessed by faith, through grace. Or, perhaps it would be like talking to a Hindu who doesn't believe in one death and then the judgment, but believes in reincarnation. We have to be willing and able to communicate with all kinds of people; find common ground. And Paul was willing.

¹Harry Eyres, "Ennobled by Suffering," in Financial Times Newspaper, Life & Arts 1/23/10, p. 16.

²To see pictures from the exhibit, go to <http://www.nga.gov/exhibitions/2010/sacred/slideshow/index.shtm>,

So Paul talks to these people who worshiped “idols made with human hands;” who had a god to rule the sky and another one who caused fertility, or gods who are in the form of an animal or who increase economic prosperity. You get the picture.

Paul proclaimed to them one God who is alive and who loved them. And in the crowd a crippled man heard the message about Jesus, and he responded with faith. Paul noticed, so he said, “Sir, get up. In the name of Jesus Christ, walk!”

And the guy did!

Now Paul did not go into that city with only the intent of healing someone. He went there to spread the gospel message, and the healing, then, validated the message. We must be careful not to isolate healing from the message. Healing of that instantaneous nature was extraordinary then, just as it would be now. So when the crowd saw the healing, these pagan people understood the implications. This God really is alive—and powerful.

So what do pagans do with that kind of event? Only what they know. They tried to sacrifice to these two men as if they were the gods who had come down. How distressing for Paul and Barnabas. Had they not gotten through? Yelling at the crowd, trying to explain, it works into a frenzy; they can hardly restrain them. Safety becomes an issue. The enemy knows how to take advantage. Satan always moves in at times of stress and chaos. Has that happened to you? When things get bad, sometimes trouble seems to snowball?

A pastor in New Jersey had a similar experience. His church was located in a drug-ridden, gang infested area. He helped young men to get out of gangs but often when they came to church, gang members attacked the church. One night a gang leader confronted this pastor with a gun, intent on doing the pastor in. The pastor was able to talk him out of it. But the threat was always there as long as they tried to rescue people from gangs. Satan fights to keep people in his grip.

So the Jews from Iconium showed up and swayed the crowd against Paul and Barnabas and the crowd stoned Paul.

The stones flew, knocking him to his knees, and soon his broken body lay bloody and lifeless on the ground. He’s dragged outside the city gate and left for dead.

How horrendous, for doing something as good as sharing the gospel.

I am helping organize a conference on evangelism for our presbytery this fall. I will not select this story to talk about sharing your faith!

So what are we to think about this story? I have to admit, when I first read it, I thought, who would ever want to do this? Is there an encouraging message here?

Some theologians believe that when Paul was lying there, suspended between life and death, that’s when Paul was taken up to heaven. He recounts it like this:

“I know a person in Christ who . . . was caught up to the third heaven-- whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. And I know that such a person . . . was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat” (2 Cor. 12:2-4).

If Paul was shown paradise at that moment, then God showed Paul what makes it all worth it. He saw all the wonderful things that await us!

Additionally, Paul learned that God’s power dwells in our weakness. He writes, “*Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong*”(9-10).

So Paul felt God’s power that day.

Another extraordinary thing happened through this tragic event.

Some of the people at Lystra had believed Paul’s testimony. What Paul said about Jesus resonated. Jesus became alive to them. So even in the face of all the anger, evil, and hatred that had pummeled Paul with stones, after it was over they rushed out to Paul. They surrounded his broken body and surely they prayed. Standing in a circle around him, surely they began to lovingly wipe the blood away, and maybe someone took off his coat and cushioned his head. Then as Paul began to stir, I imagine another quickly got him a cool drink of water, and they likely rinsed the dirt from his body.

Many surrounded him, helping him, bandaging him.

Theirs were the loving hands of Jesus soothing his wounds. I would like to do that. Would you? Without them, Paul would have died.

But with them, his body began to be healed right then and there. Strength returned. His brokenness became whole. He felt the Spirit pulsing through his body from their loving, caring hands.

It was a miracle. It’s amazing what the love of Christ can do.

I’ve seen you do that for others.

Paul was able to get up and walk back into that town because of that loving community of believers—like you. And the next day because of people like you he was able to continue on his way.

That church, First Church, Galatia, became one of the strongest, most committed churches Paul started.

Here’s how Paul interprets these kinds of events:

“What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or

distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Ro. 8:31, 32, 35-39).

Have you experienced that very personal love of God? He will stand with you in all adversity. And whenever you go to someone who is hurting and broken, we all stand strong by the power of God's love.

AMEN