

Riots, Looting, Fear and Lawlessness - If God Is in Control, Why Is This Happening?

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Scripture Readings (NIV)

2 Corinthians 6:4-5

⁴ Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses;

⁵ in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger;”

Mark 15:8-15

⁸ The crowd came up and asked Pilate to do for them what he usually did.

⁹ ‘Do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews?’ asked Pilate,

¹⁰ knowing it was out of self-interest that the chief priests had handed Jesus over to him.

¹¹ But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have Pilate release Barabbas instead.

¹² ‘What shall I do, then, with the one you call the king of the Jews?’ Pilate asked them.

¹³ ‘Crucify him!’ they shouted.

¹⁴ ‘Why? What crime has he committed?’ asked Pilate. But they shouted all the louder, ‘Crucify him!’

¹⁵ Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.

Acts 19:32, “The assembly was in confusion: Some were shouting one thing, some another. Most of the people did not even know why they were there.”

Introduction

The Bible does speak of rioting, but never in a positive light.

- In the first Scripture reading, 2 Corinthians 6:4-5, Paul was a victim of riots.

- In the second Scripture reading, Mark 15:8-15, the rioting crowd called for Jesus' death.
- In the second Scripture reading, Acts 19:32, most of the rioters did not know why they were there and were not united in their purpose.

Let's orientate ourselves on what a riot is. Merriam-Webster speaks of a violent public disorder; a group of 3 or more people acting with a common intent. It seems to me though that with recent events in South Africa, matters have fragmented from the right to protest, via rioting to criminal looting.

In the midst of all of this, people have been praying and the rioting and looting continued. Now we know that God heard our prayers, but why did/does He allow the lawlessness to continue?

In the midst of it all, I was afraid of many things, including race-based violence and physical harm to innocent persons. I worry about my children's lives – are they safe? How can I get to my mother – a widow to protect her? Can I even protect her? My WhatsApp and Facebook feed scare me.

At the Heart of a Riot

Rioting is lawlessness, which the Bible condemns. Even if the cause behind a riot is legitimate, rioting is a sinful way to address a cause, according to 1 John 3:4. In Acts 19:38-39, the city clerk of Ephesus reminded the rioters in his city, "If, then, Demetrius and his fellow craftsmen have a grievance against anybody, the courts are open and there are proconsuls. They can press charges. If there is anything further you want to bring up, it must be settled in a legal assembly."

A riot is an act of aggression, not peace. When looting happens, things are no longer about the cause. You can answer these questions for yourself, "Should a practising Christian riot? How should a practising Christian respond to what he/she sees happening?"

With rioting, there is always the danger that rational thinking and behaviour take a back seat to the immediate whims of an out-of-control crowd. We know people are getting hurt and inanimate objects are badly damaged. People are dying.

We see in Acts 19:32, that the Ephesian rioters were not shouting out of one voice and that they were divided or confused. Most did not know why they were there rioting. They were there mostly because of the noise and excitement that has been stirred up.

Let's pull the anatomy of a riot apart, and at each stage, let's ask one another these questions:

1. Are things Christ centred?
2. Is God glorified?
3. In terms of harmful and helpful, in which direction is the pendulum swinging?

Also, ponder over the fact that those who incite riots today use the same tactics that the scribes and Pharisees used in Jesus' day.

- A riot is usually instigated, it is seldom spontaneous.
- A riot is sustained by behind-the-scenes people who stir up the masses.
- Those hoping to benefit from a riot may use provocative speech, exaggerated details and hate speech, which can often be directed along the lines of race, colour, culture, and faith.
- People caught up in the passion of the moment don't realize they are being used. Perhaps this explains why some rioters loot, then go home. They leave the riot!
- Some rioters might believe that they are making a moral point by plundering and indiscriminately destroying the property of others.
- At the heart of a riot is usually jealousy or deception or hatred.

In Acts 19:23-41, 17:5 and 2 Corinthians 6:5 it was a hate-filled agenda that got people stirred up. Acts 17:5 reminds us that some "bad characters" were rounded up to support a jealousy driven riot.

Let's read Mark 11:7-10, "When they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks over it, he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, while others spread branches they had cut in the fields. Those who went ahead and those who followed shouted, "Hosanna!"

"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!" "Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

Now let's fast forward to Mark 15:8-15, "The crowd came up and asked Pilate to do for them what he usually did. "Do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews?" asked Pilate, knowing it was out of self-interest that the chief priests had handed Jesus over to him. But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have Pilate release Barabbas instead. "What shall I do, then, with the one you call the king of the Jews?" Pilate asked them. "Crucify him!" they shouted. "Why? What crime has he committed?" asked Pilate. But they shouted all the louder, "Crucify him!" Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified."

The same crowd that was shouting out "Hosanna!" are now shouting out "Crucify Him!"

A Question of Will

Where was God during all of this? Could God not have stopped the crucifixion of Jesus? Let's consult Scripture, Luke 22:42, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done." Yes, God could have stopped Jesus' crucifixion, but the will of God had to be done. That is not to say that a riot is the will of God, it is to say that God is sovereign.

Lawless rioting and looting are evidence of a situation and a people who need Jesus. If people, before they riot and loot, had to first start on prayer and seek the will of God for their present and pressing challenge at hand, they wouldn't rioting and looting. If all parties gathered as the authentic Church of Jesus Christ, then surely the will of God would be at the top of their agenda.

As we see things around us unfold, and as we run out of answers, we should actually be asking, "Lord God, what is your will for me in this moment of madness around me?"

As I survey the news and social media, some things stand out for me:

1. We need to pray for the salvation of those rioters and looters who do not know Jesus.
2. We need to pray that those who do know Jesus, repent.
3. We need to pray for affected people, especially those who have lost loved ones.

4. We need to pray for the instigators of the riot.
5. We need to pray for our country because in the days to come, a lot of rebuilding of relationships and trust needs to happen.
6. We need to pray for our country because in the days to come, because a lot must happen such as restoring food security, rebuilding of infrastructure etc.
7. We need to pray that the people of this country focus on Godly hope and seek Godly honouring outcomes to the problems.
8. We need to remind each other that the second coming of Jesus, with each passing day, is closer and the riots around us confirm this fact.

You and I are ambassadors of Heaven in a world that needs to turn to God. When we look at what has happened and is happening, we need to be that statement that says, “Things don’t work like this in my heavenly country. Have you met Jesus?”

Conclusion

Why did/is God allowing all this destruction of lives and property to happen? We know that He is in control, why isn’t He answering my prayers?

The Bible is clear that as we approach the end of this age, things will get worse. The Bible speaks of hardship and tribulation in the world. These things must happen – they are prophesied. God is hearing your prayers and is answering them according to His purposes and will.

We are not expected to understand everything. We are expected to worship God and spread the good news of Jesus Christ despite what is happening.

And yes, I am scared. This is not my faith failing me, this is part of the reality of being human, not a superhuman being. But it is also in these times that I go down on my knees and intentionally strengthen my faith through worship and prayer.

As I pray, I am reminded of the Scriptures, “Romans 3:10 states, “There is no one righteous, not even one.” Jesus in Mark 10:18 and Luke 18:19 says, “No one is good.” Psalm 14:3 and 53:3 say the same thing, “No one is good.” There is a “sin problem” around us and it is affecting us.

R.C. Sproul, when asked why do bad things happen to good people offered a deeply insightful answer, “That only happened once, and He volunteered.”

Ours is to spread the good news of Jesus Christ, to be His ambassadors and to continue to live a God-fearing – God honouring life of worship.

Amen.