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A Man Misunderstood

Acts 21:1-26

Intro: Don't you dislike being misunderstood? You do something or say something from a certain perspective and another person sees or hears it from a different perspective and takes offense even though offense was never intended or even considered. It's frustrating to have your intentions and best efforts questioned or misconstrued. Of course, many times we're the ones misunderstanding so it's not just a problem for others – it's a human problem.

It doesn't help to mention that many great people were also misunderstood. Winston Churchill was despised by most of his political rivals and misunderstood by most of Britain but it seems he was the only one up to the political challenge of standing up to Hitler and the Nazi invasion of Europe. Isaac Newton and Galileo were misunderstood by their peers in the scientific community; Martin Luther was misunderstood by the religious community. It goes without saying that Jesus was misunderstood by just about everyone in Israel – sometimes even by His own disciples! To be great is to be misunderstood. As we come to **ch21** we see this was also the case for Paul. He will be misunderstood by both friends and enemies alike.

1-14 – The missionary journeys have been completed. Paul is on his way to Jerusalem, as it turns out – for the last time. He will arrive there in **ch21** and he will be arrested there and as far as we know, he will never enjoy complete freedom of movement or self-determination as a Roman citizen again. This is not to say that Paul usefulness to the kingdom of God is over. He will still play a great part in advancing God's kingdom by continuing to evangelize the lost and building up the saints in all the churches through his letters. But, he'll be doing all this from a position of captivity.

The remainder of Acts records the beginning of the final chapters of the long and influential life of the Apostle Paul.

Paul had to tear himself away from the Ephesian elders. He had poured his life and love into these leaders and they loved him deeply in return. This must have been a painful parting but necessary as Paul was bound for Jerusalem. He and his team sailed from Miletus to Cos, then to Rhodes and

then Patara – a 3 days journey. They then hopped off that “slow boat to China” and found passage on a ship going straight to Lebanon, a 400 mile trip. Arriving at Tyre, they found some other believers and stayed with them for a week. We’re not told how the church in Tyre was started but there it was and apparently, some of the disciples there prophesied of the danger that awaited Paul in Jerusalem.

This wasn’t a casual mention; the verb tense indicates that they kept on saying to him not to go to Jerusalem.

When it was time to go, these new found brothers and sisters in Christ escorted Paul and his team to the outskirts of town and said their good-byes. It’s touching to see how much these believers had come to love Paul though they had only known him for a week. From Tyre, they sailed to Ptolemais and spent the day with the believers there and then sailed to Caesarea, the final destination of their voyage. In Caesarea, they met up with Philip, one of the original 7 deacons. He had come there some 20 years before and conducted a ministry of evangelism there ever since. Philip had served with Stephen and Paul had taken part in Stephen’s death so this must have been an interesting meeting.

As Paul rested in Caesarea, the prophet Agabus showed up to give him yet another warning from the Lord as to what awaited him in Jerusalem. In the spirit of the OT prophets, Agabus acted out his message to Paul in a dramatic way. It was this demonstration of prophecy that seems to have gotten the attention of Paul’s companions (12). Both the missionary team and the believers in Caesarea began pleading with Paul not to go to Jerusalem, even Luke joined in the chorus (we). “Surely, the representatives from the Gentile churches could deliver the love offering to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem. It isn’t necessary for you to go personally in the face of such danger.” But Paul would not be deterred for going to Jerusalem because he believed it was God’s will for him to do so.

Was Paul correct in making this trip to Jerusalem or not? It may seem improper to question the actions of an apostle but Paul was as human as we are. His epistles were inspired by the Holy Spirit but that doesn’t mean everything he did was perfect or inspired. Whether right or wrong, what can we learn from his experience?

It’s clear that Paul received many prophecies concerning what awaited him

in Jerusalem. He even mentioned this in his message to the Ephesian elders (20:23). At face value, all these messages sound like warnings to Paul to stay out of Jerusalem, but are they really? When we look back at all these prophetic messages, at no time does the Holy Spirit forbid or prohibit Paul from going to Jerusalem, He just tells Paul what is in store for him there. In light of this, it is clear that these warnings from the Spirit were actually intended to prepare Paul for what was ahead, not stop him. These prophetic utterances should be taken as warnings to “get ready,” not prohibitions to stay away.

If this is the case then what we see in vs4 is a human interpretation of the Holy Spirit’s warning of the dangers that awaited Paul. The believers in Tyre knew the prophecy was from the Holy Spirit and so, the logical response to it would be to stay away from Jerusalem. But Paul’s already stated that he was bound in the spirit to go there, knowing full well what would happen to him (20:22). Again in vs11, the prophecy of Agabus was true, accurate and genuinely from the Holy Spirit. But to this true word, his companions added a human application, pleading with him not to go.

Clearly, Paul’s ministry coworkers misunderstood that his primary mission was to see God’s will fully accomplished in his life. It is easy to do - and a constant source of trouble – when we are quick to add or include our interpretation or application to what is thought to be a word from God, often mistaking our opinions as being from God too. Across the board, we as believers find it way too easy to judge God’s will for someone else’s life while we’re often hesitant to accept it for ourselves. We must be careful to separate our opinion of God’s guidance from God’s actual guidance.

Some commentators see Paul’s unwillingness to be persuaded as an act of stubborn rebellion on his part against the clear guidance of the Holy Spirit. To me, this position shows a similar misunderstanding of his intentions and desire to do everything God had called him to do. Yes, Paul was a strong, obstinate and determined individual but these are not bad qualities. This was the personality God had given him and it was exactly the type of personality required to do what he had been called and chosen by God to do. Because Paul was stubborn, he persisted in a difficult ministry for many long years in spite of opposition, persecution and even physical abuse. He had a deep love for all people, especially his own, the Jews. He also had a strong strategy for world missions and going to Jerusalem was part of it.

Paul's insistence on going to Jerusalem despite the dangers predicted by the Holy Spirit wasn't rebellion; it was an obedient response to the command of the Holy Spirit in his heart (19:21). Paul wasn't choosing to suffer, he was choosing to follow God's will whether it results in suffering or not. Eventually, Paul's companions came to understand that God's will would be done (14). They came to the position of faith that if Paul was right or even if he was wrong, God would still use the situation for the furtherance of the gospel and to glorify His name. They left it in God's hands.

15-26 – Paul finally arrives in Jerusalem and when he meets with the apostles and elders there, he gives them a full and accurate account of what the Lord had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. While the elders were genuinely pleased to hear this report, it seems that some legalistic “brethren” had been working behind the scenes to muddy the water concerning Paul's ministry. No sooner had Paul finished his report than the elders mention a rumor that's been circulating about Paul among the Jewish Christians. They'd been told that Paul had essentially become anti-Jewish, teaching Jewish believers that it was wrong for them to continue in Jewish laws and customs. This was a slanderous, false rumor against Paul because he never taught anything like that at all.

What did Paul teach? It's clear from Gal 4:1-11 that Paul regularly warned Gentiles against getting caught up in the old Jewish religion (9-11). He knew that Judaism would add nothing but confusion and bondage to their faith. But, Paul never told Jews that it was wrong for them to practice their customs – as long as they didn't trust in ceremony, or make their customs a test of Christian fellowship (Rom 14-15). There was freedom to observe special days and diets and believers were not to judge or condemn one another because of it (14:4-6). The same grace that gave the Gentiles freedom to abstain also gave the Jews freedom to observe. God just expected them to receive one another and not allow the observance or non-observance to create problems or divisions in the church.

Paul couldn't have had a problem with Jewish Christians who wanted to continue to observe old customs and laws because he did it himself at times, like when he took and fulfilled his vow of consecration in ch18. Paul seemed fine with this as long as it they didn't believe that it made them more right before God. This was true even in OT times; customs and

ceremony didn't bring salvation. They were merely an expression of obedience from those who were already trusting in God. Any Jew who followed the Law and customs in a mechanical way was none the better for it.

It seems incredible that Paul's enemies within the church would accuse him of such things, for all the evidence was against them. Paul had Timothy circumcised before taking him along on his 2nd missionary journey. He had taken a Jewish vow himself when he left Corinth and was always careful never to offend the Jews in any way by deliberately violating their customs or laws. But, rumors are not generally based on facts. They thrive on half-truths, prejudices and bald-faced lies. It's been said that, though a rumor doesn't have a leg to stand on, it still travels mighty fast. Paul's enemies misconstrued his teaching on grace causing many in the church to misunderstand his message.

How did the elders address this? I don't think they believed this ugly rumor about Paul but they did seem to think a lot of believers in the church did. Their solution was to let actions speak louder than words. In order to get out in front of this false rumor, they suggested that Paul publicly demonstrate his reverence for Jewish customs by sponsoring 4 men under a self-imposed Nazarite vow. Paul could identify with them by paying for their sacrifices and being with them in the temple for their time of purification. It seems that Paul agreed to do this without any hesitation.

This brings us to yet another theological dilemma in Paul's life. Was Paul wrong in sponsoring these men in their vow? Was Paul compromising everything he had taught about grace and the sufficiency of the atoning work of Jesus Christ? Again, some commentators say that this was a low point in Paul's Christian walk; that he was not just playing the hypocrite but was actually compromising the gospel by agreeing to participate with others in the sacrifice of an animal meant to be an atonement for sin. They say Paul turned his back on the only sufficient sacrifice of Christ.

I cannot ascribe to that school of thought. After all the battles Paul had been through fighting for the inclusion of the Gentile believers, insisting that they are true Christians without observing Jewish ceremony, custom and rituals; why would he waver on that at this point in his life? Paul wasn't impressed or in awe of the elders in Judea nor did he desire to impress them. Paul did

desire to see true unity within the Church between Jewish believers and Gentile believers. That's one reason why he collected that love offering from the Gentile churches – so they could express their love for their Jewish brethren in a tangible way. Paul was willing to do whatever it took to foster that unity.

Because of his desire for unity within the Body of Christ, Paul could agree to sponsor these 4 men in their vow of consecration. First, there was never a hint that such things would be required of Gentiles as a test of righteousness. also, there was never the slightest suggestion that this had anything to do with these men's personal salvation. If it had, Paul would have never cooperated because that would have severely comprised his message of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone. No, this was a matter of personal conviction on the part of Jewish believers who had the freedom to accept or reject the custom.

It's also important to understand that this offering (animal sacrifice) was not in any way for the purpose of receiving atonement or forgiveness. Paul absolutely knew and believed that only the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross could atone for sin. Not every sacrifice in the Jewish system was for atonement, some were for thanksgiving or dedication, as this one was. Paul knew that Jewish ceremonies were useless for salvation but, at the same time, they weren't destructive to the Christian life. They were only dangerous when Jews depended on them for salvation. Ultimately, Paul's motive for sponsoring these Jewish Christians in completing their vows is explained in [1 Cor 9:20](#).

27-40 – Paul's mission was misunderstood by his friends and fellow believers. His message was misunderstood by believers in the Jerusalem church and finally, we see that his entire ministry was misunderstood (deliberately) by the Jewish people as a whole. Now, just like the rumor of Paul's teaching that was floating around in the church; the accusation made against Paul in the temple was also blatantly false. But, the accusation was so egregious to the Jews that they would rather judge the severity of it before determining the accuracy of it. Their emotions were running at full speed and their brains were in neutral. The temple crowd was in an uproar but they were completely ignorant of what was going on.

Of course, these men were blinded by long-held tradition, ceremony and

ritual but consider this: the original intent Jehovah had for the nation of Israel was for them to make Him known to the entire rest of the world, something they had utterly failed to do...until now, through the efforts and ministry of the Apostle Paul. Granted, they didn't agree with Paul's message of grace or his mission to the Gentiles but the truth is that Paul, in his ministry, was bringing the truth of God to the rest of the world. He was succeeding fabulously where they had failed so miserably. They didn't understand this – they wouldn't – but that didn't make it any less true. Paul's ministry was blessing the whole world.

In the next chapter, Paul will offer a defense of his faith and ministry but it will not be received by this crowd. Paul will be placed under arrest and put into bondage but that will not end his usefulness to the church or God's kingdom.

If you are going to serve Christ, be prepared to be misunderstood. It is easier for the lost to follow and believe their perception of reality than to face and submit to the reality of the truth. What is our defense to this self-destructive but well established mind-set? A life lived well for Jesus Christ by the power and through the direction of the Holy Spirit is the best, if not only, way to clarify your mission, message and ministry. People may still choose to believe the worst about you, they may rather accept the rumor than the reality but they'll have to do so in the face of undeniable truth: what the testimony your life declares about the character and nature of the Savior you love and Master you serve. 😊