

36. Being misunderstood?

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Have you ever been misunderstood by others? Duh! Who hasn't, right? By some crazy way, even though what you've said or done has nothing to do with what you were accused of, you become totally misunderstood by just about everyone around you. Or flat out nothing that you've ever said or done, but they thought that you are the one.

Then, you get that look from those who are around you with a murmured sentence under their breath – "I knew that something was not right with you." Somehow all of your friendship and good rapport with them have gone down the drain, but now you get a "You-Pathetic" glare and cold shoulders. As you know, by being misunderstood, some people lose everything they have, get jailed, beaten up, or even killed.

If that is where you are, you're in good company. Jesus was misunderstood and was crucified; Paul was misunderstood and was arrested and jailed and executed; Noah the ark-builder was misunderstood and was called crazy and ridiculed.

Speaking of Noah, the movie "Noah" is the least biblical film ever made by Hollywood. I read an article by the director of the movie who said, "We took an artistic license to make the movie." I knew right away that it was going to be a very unbiblical movie.

In the movie, Noah becomes almost crazy as he believes the only purpose to his family's existence was to help build the Ark for the "innocent" animals. Obviously this is a worship of creation rather than the Creator. Noah repeatedly tells his family that they were the last generation and were never to procreate. So when his daughter-in-law becomes pregnant, he vows to murder his own grandchild. But he finally has a change of heart. The worst of all, Noah does not have a relationship with God in the movie. And the movie claims that the main reason God destroyed the earth and the people with the flood was because they didn't take care of the nature He created. What does the Bible say about the main reason?

Genesis 6:13 And God said to Noah, "The end of all flesh has come before Me, for the earth is filled with violence through them; and behold, I will destroy them with the earth."

If you want to go see a great movie, try "God's not dead." with young people. It is the best Christian movie I've ever seen.

OK, let's get back to the Book of Acts. In this chapter 21, we will witness that our apostle Paul was misunderstood for something he hadn't done by the people who hated him with everything they had for many years. Finally, they had a chance to falsely accuse him. I believe that the Lord will show us how to handle ourselves in the midst of being misunderstood through this morning's study.

A. REPORTING WHAT THE LORD HAD DONE

Acts 21:15-19 And after those days we packed and went up to Jerusalem. 16 Also some of the disciples from Caesarea went with us and brought with them a certain Mnason of Cyprus, an early disciple, with whom we were to lodge. 17 And when we had come to Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly. 18 On the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were

present. 19 When he had greeted them, he told in detail those things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry.

It was a journey of sixty-five miles from Caesarea to Jerusalem that took at least three days by foot. The population of Jerusalem would swell up to 2.5 million people due the Day of Pentecost feast.

Paul gave a full and accurate account of what the Lord had done through his ministry in Asia Minor and Greece.

B. FALSE ACCUSATION No. 1 IN THE JERUSALEM CHURCH

Acts 21:20-25 And when they heard it, they glorified the Lord. And they said to him, "You see, brother, how many myriads of Jews there are who have believed, and they are all zealous for the law; 21 but they have been informed about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs. 22 What then? The assembly must certainly meet, for they will hear that you have come. 23 Therefore do what we tell you: We have four men who have taken a vow. 24 Take them and be purified with them, and pay their expenses so that they may shave their heads, and that all may know that those things of which they were informed concerning you are nothing, but that you yourself also walk orderly and keep the law. 25 But concerning the Gentiles who believe, we have written and decided that they should observe no such thing, except that they should keep themselves from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality."

Do you get the feeling that the Christian legalists in the Jerusalem church had been working overtime behind the scenes? No sooner had Paul finished his report than the elders brought up the rumors that were then being circulated about Paul among the Jewish Christians. It has well been said that, though a rumor doesn't have a leg to stand on the truth, it travels mighty fast.

Of course, this accusation was unfounded. Paul had told the Gentiles that they did not have to become Jews to be saved, nor did they have to observe any of the Jewish customs and festivals and the elders of the Jerusalem church supported his teaching. However, Paul had never forbidden the Jews from continuing their religious traditions after salvation. In fact, he was particularly sensitive to the Jewish believers, insisting that half-Jewish Timothy be circumcised so as not to offend them.

You have to wonder why so many Christian Jews were still clinging to the Law of Moses. Had they not read the Book of Romans and Galatians? Probably not. Old customs and traditions are difficult to change. This was the reason the Lord would have to send a special letter to the Jews, "the Epistle to the Hebrews," to explain the relationship between the OT and NT through Jesus Christ. I love what Dr. Donald Grey Barnhouse said about the Book of Hebrews: "The Book of Hebrews was written to the Hebrews to tell them to stop being Hebrews!"

When the Jews came back to their land Israel from the Babylon exile in 538 BC, they swore that they would not practice idol worship but worship the true living God. However, eventually they started to worship something else other than the true God again – their tradition and rituals in Judaism as well as the temple. To them, these things were more important than worshiping the Messiah. Jesus pointed this out to them, but they didn't want to hear Him. Many people today still fall for the same trap – honoring the religion more than the Lord.

These Jewish Christians had been told that Paul was teaching against the Law of Moses. Yes, they had been told. They didn't care to know who started this accusation, nor did they care about the evidence or witness. Their mind was already made up since they didn't like the Gentiles having the same access to God through the grace in Jesus Christ as they did. The accusations always are solely based on hearsay and gossip.

Some Bible commentators say that Paul was compromising here by agreeing with the legalistic OT rituals. I disagree. If it had been a matter of salvation, you can be sure that the apostle would never have agreed with the elders of the Jerusalem church. But it was a matter of personal conviction on the part of Jewish believers who were given the freedom to accept or reject the customs.

Besides, the sacrifice that Paul was supposed to make was not in any way for the purpose of atonement or forgiveness. Paul absolutely understood that only the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross atones for sin. Yet not every sacrifice in the Jewish system was for atonement; many were for thanksgiving or dedication, as this one was.

C. FALSE ACCUSATION No. 2 IN THE TEMPLE

To cook up a false accusation, there must be three important ingredients: Exaggeration, suspicion, and overreaction. Did you notice that all three of them have to do with emotion, not the truth?

1) Exaggeration

Acts 21:26-28a Then Paul took the men, and the next day, having been purified with them, entered the temple to announce the expiration of the days of purification, at which time an offering should be made for each one of them. 27 Now when the seven days were almost ended, the Jews from Asia, seeing him in the temple, stirred up the whole crowd and laid hands on him, 28 crying out, "Men of Israel, help! This is the man who teaches all men everywhere against the people,

The first tactic of any false accusation is exaggeration. Without it, the story would be dull and no one would pay attention. None of these accusations are based on evidence, yet the Jews who were in the inner court of the temple went for it hook, line, and sinker.

2) Suspicion

Acts 21:28b-29 the law, and this place; and furthermore he also brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place." 29 (For they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian with him in the city, whom they supposed that Paul had brought into the temple.)

They suspected that Paul had brought a Gentile, Trophimus the Ephesian into the temple inner court. Have they actually seen him do it? No, but to them, the truth didn't matter. They assumed that Paul was a friend of the Gentiles and they saw Paul with Trophimus in the city, and now Paul was in the temple. For this, we would say, "So what?!?!"

It was absolutely prohibited for Gentiles to go beyond the designated "Court of the Gentiles" in the temple grounds. Signs were posted which read: "No foreigner may enter within the barricade which surrounds the temple and enclosure. Any one who is caught trespassing will bear personal responsibility for his ensuing death," in both Greek and Latin. The Romans were so sensitive to this that they authorized the Jews

to execute anyone that offended in this way, even if the offender was a Roman citizen.

3) Overreaction

Acts 21:30-36 And all the city was disturbed; and the people ran together, seized Paul, and dragged him out of the temple; and immediately the doors were shut. 31 Now as they were seeking to kill him, news came to the commander of the garrison that all Jerusalem was in an uproar. 32 He immediately took soldiers and centurions, and ran down to them. And when they saw the commander and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul. 33 Then the commander came near and took him, and commanded him to be bound with two chains; and he asked who he was and what he had done. 34 And some among the multitude cried one thing and some another. So when he could not ascertain the truth because of the tumult, he commanded him to be taken into the barracks. 35 When he reached the stairs, he had to be carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the mob. 36 For the multitude of the people followed after, crying out, "Away with him!"

Exaggeration leads to suspicion, then suspicion to overreaction. When our emotion is running in full speed with our brains in neutral or absent, we can go from godly and logical to demonic and murderous in a very short time.

From the Tower of Antonia, at the northwest corner of the temple mount, more than 500 Roman soldiers were stationed only two flights of stairs from the Court of the Gentiles. The Romans didn't sympathize with Paul, but they were interested in keeping public order, so they arrested Paul both for his own protection and to remove the cause of the uproar. How ironic! God used the Gentile soldiers to rescue the apostle.

Being misunderstood hurts. You feel in your heart that you are right, but no one else thinks so. It is a very painful thing. In fact, I do not know that there is anything more painful, and if you want vindication, it is a very real desire.

Here is the good news: God wants to vindicate us.

Here is the bad news: It has to be done His way and in His time.

1 Peter 5:6 Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time

There is no biblical guarantee that vindication will come in this life. That is God's sovereign choice.

But He may want to continue using you while still letting some people question your service and integrity. You may have to live with that. Remember that Joseph was falsely accused of a rape attempt of Potiphar's wife. Are you aware that Joseph's name never was cleared? The Bible does not say that his name was ever cleared, but God still went ahead and used him so mightily that no one remembered that false charge. I am sure that Joseph would have wanted his name cleared. You may have a similar experience. But God might just want to use you and let this aspect be left as a sore spot in your life to keep you humble.

D. APPLICATIONS

1) If you are being misunderstood, let your Lord be your Defense. Draw close to Him. The more you try to defend yourself, the deeper the misunderstanding will go.

Proverbs 18:10 The name of the Lord is a strong tower; The righteous run to it and are safe.

2) If you have a bad opinion about someone, ask yourself if your conclusion comes from hearsay or gossip. If so, you need to find out the truth. If it is necessary, you owe an apology to that person.

James 5:16 Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.