

Title: Well, that didn't go as planned
Text: Acts 21.17-36
Theme: Living with distrust and disappointment
Series: Acts
Prop Stmt: Distrust and disappointment can destroy you unless you keep your eye on the bullseye of the gospel.

Read Text:

What just happened? Simply put, Paul was accused of doing something that he never did, was arrested and spent the better part of the next ten years in prison from Jerusalem to Caesarea to Rome, where he eventually was executed. We see it all the time, don't we and we find ourselves saying, "That's not true! I never did that! I never said that! What are you talking about?" In many cases, things get discussed and worked out. Other times they don't and relationships are wounded or severed. But, when someone loses a job, loses their family, loses their freedom, loses their reputation or loses their life, it feels too much to take.

But, before this happened, Paul had already experienced other misunderstandings, and while I have always appreciated Paul, my admiration for him and affection for him went to another this week as I really tried to consider all that happened to him from some of the people that he should have been able to trust - his own people. When someone distrusts you and lies about you it can be devastating, unless you keep your eye on the bullseye of the gospel. In fact, what happens to Paul sound so much like what happened to Christ. He was falsely accused and arrested. The legal system did not know what to do with him. The officials were willing to sacrifice truth to appease the crowd. And an innocent person was killed. This story has played out thousands of times in the history of Christianity and still happens today. Why did Paul not become enraged and eaten alive with bitterness? The same reason Jesus didn't. And it's the same reason why your life is not really ruined even when to others it appears to be.

I. Expect Misunderstandings (17-26)

Paul and his team arrive in Jerusalem. At this point, there is no mention of Peter or the other apostles. I am guessing that they are not in the area. James and the elders are the leaders of the church in Jerusalem and who knows what they were actually thinking about Paul. They were all aware of the rumors and they were aware of what many of the people had concluded about Paul. But, this much is clear. After listening to Paul who, *"related one by one the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry,.. they glorified God"* (19-20) Paul gave them a detailed report and made it very clear that this was the work of God and they accepted it as such. But, notice what they said in response. *"You see brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed. They are all zealous for the law, and they have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses.... "*

What was that about? Well, at the least they are saying that the gospel is not only spreading among the Gentiles, but it is also spreading among the Jews here in Jerusalem and while that is cause for rejoicing this also presents a problem as they point out. Many of these Jewish believers are very zealous for the law. This is a problem and I have no doubt that Paul would be very

concerned when he heard this, because this was a problem that he faced back in Antioch and in the churches of Galatia. It sounds like the nationalistic emphasis that the Pharisees placed on Jewish life by strict adherence to the law had heavily influenced these believers. In fact, by following the law, they may have avoided a lot of persecution. This is a problem and (I am reading between the lines here a little bit but) it doesn't sound as if James and the elders have handled it very well. The presence of Paul now forces them to face this problem because the prevailing belief is that Paul has been telling Jews in these other cities not to follow Jewish laws and customs and they are very zealous for them - meaning, they will probably want to kill you.

Luke does not record Paul's personal response, but this has to be very disheartening. In fact, what is glaringly absent from this entire account is any word of how the offering was received. Paul has spent the last few years on this mission and he obviously has very high hopes of what this will do to unite the Jewish element of the church with the Gentile element only to be confronted with this situation and what is so maddening is that it is not true! You and I live in a Petri dish that is ripe for the production and spread of rumors and lies. It is called life.

This is true about life in general and sadly even among other believers. It is easy to start rumors. It is easy to believe rumors. That takes very little energy and imagination. It takes a lot of effort to get the facts, to get context, to get understanding and to accurately represent a person and the situation.

A. Expect that some people will misunderstand you.

Some people do not have all the facts. Sometimes it really is a misunderstanding. Someone did not express something correctly, or someone did not hear correctly. That happens and it is very discouraging to see how quickly some people are willing to believe the worst about you. But, it happens, so expect misunderstandings.

B. Expect that some people will misrepresent you.

What is worse, but no less true is that some people will misrepresent you. Now, here is a spoiler alert. Paul does end up getting arrested and he ends up going to jail and even though he gets out for a little while, most of the last 10 years of his life is spent in jail and it all starts right here. He is not only betrayed by his own people, the Jews, but some of his fellow believers appear to go along with it.

Related to that is the fact that some people (even those who claim to be believers) have their own agendas and they may not even understand their own hearts. They feel slighted because they were overlooked for a certain position or feel like they do not get the acclaim they are due and when someone else gets the affirmation they feel like they should get, then they look at that person through a twisted lens and are willing to believe the worst and assume the worst and spread the worst. Even some of the people that you have been very kind to are blind to their own ignorance and their own sin and you are the recipient of it. I think I understand a little more of what Paul meant when he wrote to the church at Philippi that "Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry." Paul wrote that from jail. He wrote that as the result of being in jail from this unnecessary mess in Jerusalem. There are guys who are in the ministry who are envious of Paul

and consider themselves to be rivals of Paul. Do you think that those guys are going to represent Paul accurately? I am sorry that it can be like this. But, keep this in mind: If people will misunderstand you and in some cases people will misrepresent you, then...

C. Expect that some people will misunderstand and misrepresent others to you.

In other cases, some people do not care if they have all the facts. There are some who love to be considered as the fountain of all knowledge. Their favorite line is, "do you know what I heard?" They say so many things about other people that they do not remember everything they've said about others and don't care. Truth does not matter to them. What matters to them is that you think that they matter. They want an audience. It does not matter to them if someone is hurt, or in this case, if the gospel is distorted, the ministry of Paul is wrecked, and the very life of Paul is in peril.

I received an email recently in which a friend of mine was being wrongfully accused and I was being told that I needed to take action. The person who was doing the accusing has no idea of the personal relationship that I have with the accused. I have way more knowledge of the person in question than they do. They have never even met the person and they want me to accept their version of a story and their interpretation it. The person who sent the email is not a malicious person by nature, but was wrong and wanted to recruit me on their mission to shoot first and ask questions later.

It is easy to speculate when you do not have all of the facts. It is easy to assign motive when you do not ask good questions. It is easy to damage another's character when you are proud and assume the role of authority. I listen to how some people ask questions in a way that are intended to do damage instead of actually uncover information.

"How do I know that you are not cheating on your husband?"

This is a common tactic in what is called "journalism." Interviews and news shows are not done to communicate factual information, but to push an agenda through a carefully selected use of facts and by manipulating the audience through innuendo and insinuation.

It is easy to assume your view when you are too proud to patiently listen or too lazy to get all of the facts. Rumors and lies are the sinful and lazy methods of communication that end up destroying the reputation of the gospel, churches and people's lives.

D. Expect that you will misunderstand other people.

Here is a word of wisdom. You and I are prone to being misunderstood and we are prone to misunderstanding. Helpful conversations take a lot of time. If I am going to have a healthy debate or discussion with someone then I need to make sure that I not only understand their point of view, but I need to make sure that they understand that I understand their point of view. That takes humility because it is easy to assume that I know when I don't. Given all of this (which is honestly the result of living in a sin-cursed world)...

E. Humility and sacrifice are necessary to pursue unity. (22-25)

James and the rest of the elders of the church are certainly aware of the rumors that have been circulating about Paul and they know that this could be a big problem. In fact, they know that it is a big problem. So, they come up with a plan that the elders strongly suggest Paul to follow that sounds rather confusing to us. Let me try to explain it.

There are 4 Jewish believers who have taken a Nazirite vow. The OT (Numbers 6.1-21) provided an opportunity for a man to make a vow to God as an expression of thanksgiving or asking God to intervene directly into a situation. The one who entered into the vow established an amount of time when they would not drink wine, would not cut their hair and would not touch a dead body. These men had either completed the vow and were prepared to cut their hair, and offer an offering or sacrifice or they had become ceremonially unclean while they were under this vow and they needed to make payment to become ceremonially clean again. Either way, for Paul to pay for their expenses and to be ceremonially purified before going to the Temple (because he had traveled there from Gentile lands) would clearly demonstrate that Paul was not ignoring the law nor telling others to disobey it, but was keeping it even at personal expense.

The elders assure Paul that they are not asking Gentiles who become believers to live under the Jewish law. They repeat the agreement from the Jerusalem council (chapter 15). But they are trying to assure the Jews both believers and possibly unbelievers that Paul is not telling Jews that in order to follow Christ, they were to abandon the law. Well, the truth is, there were some aspects of the law, that Jewish believers were to abandon and others were fine to follow, but were not required. That was a fine line and I am not sure it was clearly understood. At any rate, Paul follows their counsel. He loves his people and he is willing to do what it takes to not be an unnecessary offense.

F. Pursuing unity is hard work but unity is worth pursuing. (26)

In our church covenant we promise that "We will work and pray for the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." We use those words because pursuing unity is work. And the work that we do to pursue unity must be done in the strength of the Spirit.

Once again, Luke does not tell us what Paul really thinks about this plan. All that we know is that Paul does it, the next day. At considerable personal expense, as a humble expression of following the lead of these elders in the church, Paul does what they ask.

Phil 1.1 Paul describes himself as a slave to Christ. A slave has no rights. A slave is owned by another. That sounds so demeaning to us, until we think about Christ, who said about himself, that the Son of man did not come to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many. (Mark 10.45) Later in Philippians 2, Paul talks about how Christ humbled himself and took upon himself the form of a servant. And was so obedient that he gave up his rights, the use of his power, and did not even defend himself when falsely accused.

What about my rights?! We have legal rights, but even those are not absolute and are at the mercy of the authorities. Paul exercised his legal rights a little later as we will see. But this is

worth considering. Paul, like Christ comes to Jerusalem knowing that it would be costly. In that sense, Paul, like Christ gave up his right to his rights. We are servants, slaves, bondslaves of Christ. So, how do you know if you are truly a slave of Christ? Well, how do you respond when you are treated like one? Paul, like Christ is misunderstood and wrongfully accused, but does not lash out in anger, nor is caustic and biting in his words. Misunderstandings are hard to take and if you give them too much weight in your heart, they will sink your ship. I have no doubt that you, like me have been the recipient of people's misunderstandings and you have experienced some deep hurt. What are you doing with that hurt? If you nurse it, baby it, give it oxygen and attention, it will demand more and more of you. For those of you who are quick to condemn others, quick to find fault, quick to be harsh and demeaning and assume the worse, have you ever wondered why you tend to react that way? Why are you so difficult to get along with?

II. Faithfulness to Christ and sacrificial love may not satisfy others, but it pleases God. (27-36)

The terms of the vow appeared to be for seven days. And for the good bit of a week it looks as if this use may work. But then, a group of Jews from Asia (perhaps from Ephesus) who wrongfully thought that Paul broke a Temple law, told everybody that Paul had brought a Gentile into the Jewish section of the Temple, and everything goes crazy and Paul is attacked and is being beaten when the local Roman guard comes running into the Temple area to rescue Paul. So, the elders in Jerusalem come up with this plan. We do not know what Paul thought of it, but he goes along with it and it certainly did not go as planned.

Here is why I need to preach the gospel to myself. I need to be reminded not to trust my own heart. I need to be reminded that others will disappoint me. I need to lean upon Christ for my joy even when I have been falsely slandered, misunderstood, or simply not appreciated. John 1. He came unto his own and his own did not receive him. But, that is not the end of the story. (The gospel) For those of you who are suffering under the misunderstandings and lies of others, it will get sorted out. If you have treated others sinfully, it will get sorted out. We all need to take this to heart.