

Main Idea: We learn three insights about misunderstandings from what happened to Paul in Acts 21:17-36.

- I. There will be misunderstandings in the church (17-26).
 - A. Paul spoke (17-19).
 1. He reported the facts.
 2. He put the focus on God.
 - B. The elders spoke (20-25).
 1. They praised God (20a).
 2. They raised a problem (20b-22).
 3. They proposed a plan (23-25).
 - C. Paul submitted (26).
 - II. There will be misunderstandings in the world (27-32).
 - A. Some Jews attacked Paul (27-29).
 1. They twisted the truth.
 2. They created a mob.
 - B. The whole city turned against Paul (30-32).
 - III. When misunderstood, know there is One who understands perfectly (33-36).
 - A. The Lord did what He said He would do.
 - B. The Lord used a soldier to protect Paul.
- Responding to Misunderstandings: Some lessons from Paul in 1 Cor. 9:19-23...
1. Understand your freedom (19a).
 2. Live as a slave (19b).
 3. Remember your objective (19c-22).
 4. Live for the gospel, not yourself (23).

The gospel is on trial. This is the title of our current series, for it’s what we’re seeing in the text we’re considering, Acts 21-28, as well as in our world today.

I’ve entitled today’s message, “Followers of Christ, Prepare to be Misunderstood!” For this is what’s happening in today’s text, and what is sure to happen to us as we seek to make Christ known in this world.

For our Scripture reading, I want us to hear a passage that Paul wrote and models for us in the account we’ll be considering today.

Scripture Reading: 1 Corinthians 9:19-23

I’d like to begin with a story that relates to the subject before us today. One dark rainy night a salesman had a flat tire on a lonely road. But to his dismay he had no lug wrench. Seeing a nearby farmhouse, he set out on foot. Surely the farmer would have a lug wrench, he thought. But would he even come to the door? And if he did, he’d probably be furious at being bothered. He’s say, “What’s the big idea getting me out of bed in the middle of the night?” This thought made the salesman angry. Why, that farmer is a selfish old clod to refuse to help me. Finally, the man reached the house. Frustrated and drenched, he banged on the door. “Who’s there?” a voice called out from a window overhead.

“You know good and well who it is,” yelled the salesman, his face red with anger. “It’s me! And you can keep your old lug wrench! I wouldn’t borrow it is it was the last one in the county.”²

We’re going to talk about *misunderstandings* this morning, particularly the frustration of being misunderstood. Dealing with misunderstandings is a part of life and especially a vital part of living the Christian life.

^{**}Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ For a previous look at this passage, see the Acts series preached at WBC in 2003.

² *Daily Bread*.

It's true. Do something for God and everyone will applaud, right? Not exactly. The fact is, if you do God's will some people will take it wrong. They'll misunderstand and they may even choose to misrepresent you.

"Well, if somebody doesn't appreciate the work I'm trying to do for God, that's *their problem*, not mine," you might say. Hold on, not so fast. When a misunderstanding occurs in the Body of Christ it is *our* problem.

Beloved, we have a mission. If we take that God-given mission seriously and live life on the front-lines, we must learn how to deal with misunderstandings in a God-honoring way—or we won't be on the front-lines long, but will find ourselves sulking back in the mess hall.

Think of it this way. Satan wants to use misunderstandings to derail the gospel train. *But we must not let him.* We must not be ignorant of his devices. We must, in the words of Ephesians 4:3, "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace."

That's what people like Paul did in the book of Acts, and that's one of the reasons God used them so effectively. Ephesians 4:3 would be a fitting reference to write across the top of the page over the story of Acts 21. If we want to understand why Paul did what he did in Acts 21, we find the answer in Ephesians 4:3. He was "endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit," as the KJV puts it.

It's not natural to endeavor to keep the unity of the Spirit. It takes effort to do what pleases the Supernatural. When our feelings get hurt by the misunderstanding of others, we want to throw in the towel, or worse yet, lash back. Paul didn't, as we're about to see, for the simple fact that the work of God must go forward, *no matter what.*

The story is rather straightforward. On the day he wrapped up his third missionary journey, Paul faced the frustration of being misunderstood. We'll look at the misunderstandings, then at how Paul responded, and finally consider some lessons from Paul's example that can help us. Now to the story. Simply put, we learn three insights about misunderstandings from what happened to Paul in Acts 21:17-36.

I. There will be misunderstandings in the church (17-26).

I must say it again, lest we be surprised when it happens to us. *If we do God's work, the time will come when we will experience the frustration of being misrepresented.* It's not *maybe*. We will, as Paul did. And like Paul the source of the misunderstanding may rise, first of all, from our brothers and sisters in the church itself.

Here's how the first misunderstanding surfaced. Three things took place.

A. Paul spoke (17-19). Verse 17 sets the backdrop, "When we arrived at Jerusalem, the brothers received us warmly [ESV 'gladly']." The "we" refers to Paul and his teammates, including Luke, Timothy, and about six other believers from the churches the Lord has used Paul to establish in the Gentile world (20:4-5). These men came with Paul to deliver a benevolent offering to the needy Jewish believers in Jerusalem.

Last time we observed several warnings given to Paul about this trip. "Don't go!" they pleaded. "The Spirit makes it clear you're heading into serious danger!" But Paul would not be deterred. He said he was ready to die for Jesus in Jerusalem, if necessary.

Things started off well. A Jewish believer from Cyprus, Mnason, opened up his home to keep the missionary team. Apparently, several church members came to Mnason's house to welcome Paul to town. And Paul quickly got down to business.

Verses 18-19—"The next day Paul and the rest of us went to see James, and all the elders were present. Paul greeted them and reported in detail what God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry."

It's interesting that Luke doesn't say anything about the offering. We can assume that it was at this time that Paul handed over the offering to the elders (as indicated in 24:17), but that event receives no ink. Something else deserves our attention.

Note that a shift has occurred in church leadership, from apostles to elders. Back in Acts 2 and Acts 5 and Acts 6, it was Peter and the apostles leading the way in decisions affecting the local church. However, by the time we come to Acts 21, twenty-seven years have passed since Jesus returned to heaven. It's AD 57 and the apostles are not leading the church in Jerusalem any longer, for two reasons.

One, they're no longer living in Jerusalem but have taken the gospel throughout the world. And two, the Holy Spirit is transitioning the leadership of His church from the temporary presence of apostles to the permanent setup of elders (i.e. pastors) as continues to the present.

Paul went to see James. This isn't the apostle James, but the half-brother of Jesus and the author of the epistle that bears his name. Paul also met with the elders—a number isn't given, but since there were several thousand believers in Jerusalem, F. F. Bruce suggests there may have been as many as seventy elders, “constituting a sort of Nazarene Sanhedrin, with James as their president.”³

By the way, this James was well-respected by non-Christian Jews and earned the title, “James the Just.” Eusebius said his knees were like those of a camel because of all the time he spent in prayer.

It was to this James and the elders that Paul spoke that day, and said two things.

1. *He reported the facts.* Luke says, “Paul greeted them and *reported in detail* what God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry.” He had a lot to share—and he didn't rush but gave the details. The ESV says, “He related *one by one* the things that God had done.”

Undoubtedly, he told them about what happened in Ephesus, about the followers of John the Baptist who received the Holy Spirit, about his two year, daily teaching ministry from the lecture hall of Tyrannus that was so effective that *everyone* living in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord. And about the Ephesian riot that resulted because of the economic effect the gospel had on the pagan idol businesses. Surely, he told them about the all-night Bible study at Troas when Eutychus fell asleep and fell out of a window to his death, only to be raised to life again.

I can imagine Paul next pointing the elders' attention to exhibit A, Sopater from Berea, then to exhibit B, Aristarchus from Thessalonica, and to the other Gentile team members he had recruited and trained for gospel ministry.⁴ In giving this report, Paul summarized at least three years of ministry. But this was no boring bullet list.

2. *He put the focus on God.* He reported in detail *the things that God had done* through his ministry. We're in trouble when we forget this is *God's work*, and if God doesn't work it won't happen.

God did it. Yes, God uses people but God does the work, and therefore, He gets the glory. A preacher can't open a sinner's heart. God must do the opening. A sinner can't save himself. God must do the saving.

So Paul spoke and put the focus on God. Then...

B. The elders spoke (20-25). Essentially, they had three things to say.

1. *They praised God (20a).* “When they heard this, they praised God [ESV “they glorified God”; KJV “they glorified the Lord’].” That's the goal of any good testimony. People don't praise the messenger. They praise God! And that's what the elders did that day. These *Jewish* elders glorified God because of what He had done with Gentiles.

³ F. F. Bruce, *Acts*, p. 429.

⁴ Kent Hughes, p. 292.

But their praise had barely left their lips when something else surfaced, a problem.

2. *They raised a problem (20b-22)*. “Then [right after the praising] they said to Paul: “You see, brother, how many thousands of Jews have believed, and all of them are zealous for the law. They have been informed that you teach all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to turn away from Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or live according to our customs. What shall we do? They will certainly hear that you have come...”

It’s been said that although a rumor doesn’t have a leg to stand on, it travels mighty fast!⁵ What were the critics saying about Paul? Essentially, the same thing they said about Stephen and, before him, Jesus, that he was teaching the Jews to forsake the laws of Moses.

Note that the criticism this time wasn’t what Paul was doing with the *Gentiles*. That issue surfaced and was settled at the Jerusalem council back in Acts 15. This time the accusation was that Paul was telling *Jews* to turn from the Law.

Was it true? Was Paul telling his kinsmen to turn away from the Law? Absolutely not. He wasn’t even telling the Gentiles to turn away from the Law. Paul didn’t teach *against* the Mosaic Law, or circumcision, or even Jewish customs. Rather he taught *for* Christ. He proclaimed that Christ fulfilled the Law’s demands for us, and that salvation belonged to those who believed in Christ.

If you think about it, the rumor doesn’t even make sense. The record shows that Paul was not anti-Jewish law. To prove that he had Timothy circumcised before taking him on the second missionary journey (Acts 16:1-3). He himself took a Nazarite vow while in Corinth (Acts 18:18), and then consummated that vow the last time he was in Jerusalem.

No, Paul was not anti-law. What he was against was anyone who made the keeping of the law of Moses a prerequisite for salvation.⁶

So this was the problem. There were some people (the elders don’t identify who they were although 21:27 indicates it may have been the Jews from Asia Minor) who were spreading dangerous half-truths about Paul. Regardless of the source, thousands of Jews had heard this rumor. This was a huge problem, and it threatened to split the church right down the middle.

3. *They proposed a plan (23-25)*. Verse 23, “Do therefore what we tell you.” Notice they didn’t offer a suggestion but an instruction. And the fact that Paul obeyed it indicates that even an apostle is under local church authority, as long as the authority is consistent with God’s Word. Here was the elders’ plan (24-25):

“There are four men with us who have made a vow. Take these men, join in their purification rites and pay their expenses, so that they can have their heads shaved. Then everybody will know there is no truth in these reports about you, but that you yourself are living in obedience to the law. As for the Gentile believers, we have written to them our decision that they should abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality.”

Apparently, four church members had taken a Nazarite vow. They were men, Jewish men who had declared their allegiance to Jesus the Messiah. Yet they were also following OT practices, in this case, a vow.

Barclay explains, “This was a vow taken in gratitude for some special blessing from the hand of God. It involved abstention from meat and wine for thirty days, during which

⁵ Wiersbe, p. 490.

⁶ Here is a good summary of Paul’s approach to the Law. 1 Corinthians 7:18–19 “Was anyone at the time of his call already circumcised? Let him not seek to remove the marks of circumcision. Was anyone at the time of his call uncircumcised? Let him not seek circumcision. ¹⁹ For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God.”

the hair had to be allowed to grow. It seems that sometimes at least the last seven days had to be spent entirely in the Temple courts. At the end certain offerings had to be brought—a year old lamb for a sin-offering, a ram for a peace offering, a basket of unleavened bread, cakes of fine flour mingled with oil and a meat offering and a drink offering. Finally, the hair had to be shorn and burned on the altar with the sacrifice.”⁷

As you can imagine this would have been costly. It was considered an act of piety for a wealthy person to cover the expenses of someone taking such a vow.

That was the elders’ plan. Paul, join these men in this vow. Pay their expenses, and then everybody will know the rumors are false.

At which point Paul said, “Are you kidding?! It doesn’t matter what people think of me.”

Of course, that’s not true, and that wasn’t Paul’s response. Paul did care what people thought of him, not for *his* sake but for the *gospel’s*. He knew what we tend to forget, that what we do as Christians affects the receptivity of people to the gospel.

Isn’t that true? I could mention some names right now of well known, professing Christians whose public sins have made it a whole lot harder to talk about Christ with lost people.

Paul knew it was true. What people were saying about him was about to create all kinds of bad press for the gospel, and that mattered to him. He didn’t want to see the church of Jesus Christ split into a Jewish faction and a Gentile faction. He wanted believers from both backgrounds “to endeavor to keep the unity” of the church. So...

C. Paul submitted (26). “The next day Paul took the men and purified himself along with them. Then he went to the temple to give notice of the date when the days of purification would end and the offering would be made for each of them.”

Some will say, “I’m not in to being political. I do what I think is right. Period.”

Hold on. Paul is *not* being political here. If anyone had convictions and was willing to stand for them, it’s Paul. Yes, there’s a time to stand. But there’s also a time to humble ourselves for the sake of something much bigger than ourselves.

What precisely is Paul thinking here? Verse 26 tells us what he did. But why? Paul knew that he didn’t have to observe ceremonial vows to be right with God, that a person is declared right with God on the basis of Christ’s atoning work, not the works of the law. But still he chose to participate in this vow, this work of the law.

Again, why? Some say he was wrong for doing so. I read James Boice’s commentary, and he entitles this chapter, “When a Good Man Falls.” Boice, whose insights I highly respect, says he believes Paul was wrong for going to Jerusalem, and calls Paul’s willingness to take this vow “a compromise of the gospel.”⁸

I disagree. I don’t think Paul was wrong for going to Jerusalem, nor for taking this vow. I think I know what he was thinking when he did this, because he told us. Not in Acts 21, but in a letter he wrote.

Paul’s discussion with James, and his willingness to go through this purification rite, took place in AD 57. It’s significant that he wrote his epistle to the Romans earlier that year, in the winter of AD 56-57, probably from Corinth (Acts 20:1-3). He mentions in Romans 15:25 that he was heading soon to Jerusalem to deliver the offering to the Jews.

Just think. While all the chaos was happening that we’re reading about in Acts 21, Paul’s mind was saturated with the truths he’d just articulated in Romans, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. What was he thinking when he said, “Yes, James, I’ll do it.”? It was this...

⁷ Barclay, p. 155.

⁸ James Boice, p. 360.

I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first, and also to the Greek (1:16).

What advantage then has the Jew? Much in every way (3:1).

Are the Jews any better off? No, not at all. Both Jews and Greeks are under sin (3:9).

The promise to Abraham did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith (4:13).

What shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means (7:7).

All things work together for good (8:28, including getting arrested in Jerusalem).

If God is for us, who can be against us (8:31)?

I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh. ⁴ They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. ⁵ To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen (9:2–5).

Not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel (9:6).

Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law. Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone (9:31–32).

Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge (10:1–2).

Faith comes by hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ (10:17).

Has God rejected his people? By no means! For I myself am an Israelite (11:1).

So I ask, did they stumble in order that they might fall? By no means! Rather, through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous (11:11).

I do not want you to be unaware of this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in (11:25).

As regards the gospel, they are enemies for your sake. But as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers (11:28).

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! For from Him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever (11:33, 36).

As for the one who is weak in faith [the Jewish Christian], welcome him. One person believes he may eat anything [the Gentile Christian], while the weak person eats only vegetables [the Jewish Christian]. ³ Let not the one who eats [the Gentile Christian] despise the one who abstains [the Jewish Christian], and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him (14:1–3).

I hope to see you [Christians in Rome] as I go to Spain. At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints (15:24–25).

What's going through Paul's mind in Acts 21? There's the answer. Romans. Why does he go to Jerusalem? Why does he risk his life there? He tells us in Romans.

This wasn't a matter of salvation but of liberty, Christian liberty. Back in Acts 15 when the Judaizers said a Gentile had to be circumcised to be saved, Paul resisted firmly. "No way," he said. "That would violate the gracious nature of the gospel. Salvation is by faith, not by works." And James and the elders agreed.

But what's at stake this time isn't the *message* of the church, but the *unity* of the church. Paul knew he could go through with this ceremonial rite. There wasn't anything sinful about it. After all, it came from the Law of God Himself! Paul knew he didn't

need to keep this law for his salvation. He kept it, not for personal reasons, but for interpersonal reasons. He's putting Romans 15 into practice.

The story is told of two congregations located only a few blocks from each other in a small community. The two struggling churches decided to unite and become one in order to be more effective. But the merger didn't happen. Why not? Because they couldn't agree on how to recite the Lord's prayer. One group wanted "forgive us our trespasses," while the other demanded "forgive us our debts."⁹

How the church needs men and women like Paul, who will lay aside personal preferences with a deep resolve to do that which best promotes the unity of the church and the advancement of the gospel! For Paul, the decision had to do with a keeping a ceremony that frankly was no longer necessary. But he chose to do it. He chose to change his diet for a few days, get his hair cut, and pay a chunk of money to cover the costs for his brothers.

I wonder what Paul would do if he lived today, and the decision pertained, not to going through some purification rite, but to wearing a mask, or getting a vaccine? I think he would do what I have seen you do, dear church family, to see these as Christian liberty issues, and to refuse to allow them to divide us, because our unity and the advancement of the gospel means more to us than our preferences.

Misunderstandings are unavoidable in the church. When they occur, we can defend ourselves, or retaliate, or clam up, or divide the church into camps. Or like Paul, we can clothe ourselves with humility, and follow the theology of Romans to its beautiful, Christ-exalting, righteousness-producing, church-uniting, gospel-advancing end.

There will be misunderstandings in the church. That's insight #1 from Acts 21.

II. There will be misunderstandings in the world (27-32).

I mentioned James Boice earlier. Though I disagree with his assessment of Paul in Acts 21, I highly value many other things he has said. Let's listen to a story he shared:

"During WWI one of my predecessors at Tenth Presbyterian Church, Donald Grey Barnhouse, led the son of a prominent American family to the Lord. He was in the service, but he showed the reality of his conversion by immediately professing Christ before the soldiers of his military company. The war ended. The day came when he was to return to his pre-war life in the wealthy suburb of a large American city. He talked to Barnhouse about life with his family and expressed fear that he might soon slip back into his old habits. He was afraid that love for parents, brothers, sisters, and friends might turn him from following after Jesus Christ. Barnhouse told him that if he was careful to make public confession of his faith in Christ, he would not have to worry. He would not have to give improper friends up. They would give him up.

"As a result of this conversation the young man agreed to tell the first ten people of his old set whom he encountered that he had become a Christian. The soldier went home. Almost immediately--in fact, while he was still on the platform of the suburban station at the end of his return trip--he met a girl whom he had known socially. She was delighted to see him and asked how he was doing. He told her, "The greatest thing that could possibly happen to me has happened." "You're engaged to be married," she exclaimed. "No," he told her. "It's even better than that. I've taken the Lord Jesus Christ as my Savior." The girls' expression froze. She mumbled a few polite words and went on her way. A short time later the new Christian met a young man whom he had known before going into the service. "It's good to see you back," he declared. "We'll have some great parties now that you've returned." "I've just

⁹ K. Hughes, p. 297.

become a Christian," the soldier said. He was thinking, 'That's two!' Again it was a case of a frozen smile and a quick change of conversation. After this the same circumstances were repeated with a young couple and with two more old friends. By this time word had got around, and soon some of his friends stopped seeing him. He had become peculiar, religious, and -- who knows! -- they may even have called him crazy! What had he done? Nothing but confess Christ. The same confession that had aligned him with Christ had separated him from those who did not want Jesus Christ as Savior and who, in fact, did not even want to hear about Him."¹⁰

The world doesn't understand Christians. They sure didn't Paul.

A. Some Jews attacked Paul (27-29). "When the seven days were nearly over, some Jews from the province of Asia saw Paul at the temple."

Uh oh! We've met these fellows before in Acts. These trouble-makers were somehow connected with the guys in Ephesus back in Acts 19:8-9 who by their abusive language forced Paul to leave the synagogue. Paul responded by just moving across town to the lecture hall of Tyrannus, and kept teaching. But the critics weren't going to let him get away this time.

Notice verses 27-29 (ESV), "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 is teaching everyone everywhere against the people and the law and this place. Moreover, he even 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, and they supposed that Paul had brought him into the temple."

The first misunderstanding was painful for Paul, but this one was deadly. These fanatic Jews from Asia want blood. And to get it they uttered blatant lies. They accused Paul of teaching *everyone everywhere* (notice the superlatives) against three things. He's against our people (the Jews), against our law, and against this place (the temple).

I've never had anybody want to kill me before (that I know of), but I have been misrepresented. And that hurts. Most of us have experienced that at some level. It begins with being misunderstood, and then moves to being misrepresented.

Paul's opponents attacked him in two ways.

1. *They twisted the truth.* Paul may have held a different position than they did on the role of the Law in contemporary life. Granted. But he certainly didn't teach *everyone everywhere* to turn against the Jews, the Law, and the temple. After all, he had just traveled hundreds of miles to come to Jerusalem to deliver a love gift to help the Jews!

These critics are flat out twisting the truth. And their final charge is a blatant fabrication. They said Paul "brought Greeks into the temple." Where did they come up with that condemning piece of evidence? They made it up.

Wiersbe explains, "With their emotions running at full speed, and their brains in neutral, these men argued: (1) wherever Paul went, his Gentile friends went; (2) Paul was seen in the temple; therefore, his friends had been in the temple too! Such is the logic of prejudice."¹¹

Archaeologists have actually found signs that were posted in the temple that read, "No foreigner may enter within the barricade which surrounds the temple and enclosure. Anyone who is caught doing so will have himself to blame for his ensuing death."¹²

¹⁰ J.M Boice, *Christ's Call To Discipleship*, Moody, 1986, p. 122-23.

¹¹ Wiersbe, p. 491.

¹² Bruce, p. 434.

And the Romans even allowed the Jews to carry out this sentence against trespassers. The last thing Paul would ever do would be to bring a Gentile into the temple. He knew such action would result in death not only for him, but for his Gentile friend.

But it got worse. After they twisted the truth...

2. *They created a mob.* I mean an out-of-control, hate-filled mob! How bad was it? In the course of a few minutes, the *whole* city turned against Paul.

B. The whole city turned against Paul (30-32). Listen to the text (ESV), “Then *all the city* was stirred up.” We’re talking tens of thousands of irate men and women! “And the people ran together. They seized Paul and dragged him out of the temple, and at once the gates were shut.³¹ And as they were seeking to kill him, word came to the tribune of the cohort that all Jerusalem was in confusion.³² He at once took soldiers and centurions and ran down to them. And when they saw the tribune and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul.”

Notice the intense language in this section. Stirred up. Seized. Dragged. Seeking to kill. Beating. It was pure chaos! The crowd almost tore Paul apart limb from limb, like a pack of wolves. Paul came within seconds of losing his life.

And why? For what reason? All because of a misunderstanding. Paul’s own countrymen are convinced that he, a man who loved them so much he has brought the city of a large gift of money to meet needs, and on top of that, the good news of the Messiah who offers them eternal life, is a traitor, and is unfit to live.

There will be misunderstandings in the church, and in the world too. Some of you are feeling it right now. Perhaps you’re thinking, “Yes, and I can’t take it any more!” I have good news for you, insight #3.

III. When misunderstood, know there is One who understands perfectly (33-36).

His name is the Lord Jesus Christ, and He identifies with His people, especially His *suffering* people. If anybody knew that, Paul did. Paul heard these very words on the day the Lord saved him. “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting *Me* (Acts 9:5)?”

When the mob attacked Paul, it was attacking Jesus Himself. And since Jesus wasn’t through with Paul, He intervened. And here’s how, verses 33-36 (NIV):

“The commander came up and arrested him and ordered him to be bound with two chains. Then he asked who he was and what he had done. Some in the crowd shouted one thing and some another, and since the commander could not get at the truth because of the uproar, he ordered that Paul be taken into the barracks. When Paul reached the steps, the violence of the mob was so great he had to be carried by the soldiers. The crowd that followed kept shouting, ‘Away with him!’”

It’s so good to know, brothers and sisters, in a world full of misunderstandings, there is One who understands everything perfectly! Notice two outcomes here.

A. The Lord did what He said He would do. Remember the prediction Agabus made in our last study? He took Paul’s belt, tied himself up and said, “The Holy Spirit says, ‘In this way the Jews of Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles (21:11).’” What happened to Paul was exactly what the Lord said would happen to him. He would be bound. And he was.

That’s a bad thing, right, to be bound? It’s a matter of perspective, isn’t it? It’s better than being beat to a pulp, which was Paul’s other alternative. In reality, the binding ended up being God’s means of setting Paul free from this mob.

B. The Lord used a soldier to protect Paul. And as the story unfolds in future weeks, we’ll see that this arrest by a Roman soldier begins a process that will result in Paul traveling to Rome on a trip funded by the Roman Empire, and even witnessing for Christ to the highest Roman officials in the world.

When the world misunderstands, our God understands perfectly. He knows what He is doing in our lives, dear friends.

You say, “Okay, so God understands. But how can I develop the perspective that Paul had? What was his key to responding to painful misrepresentations?” I think we find the answer in the passage that I read at the beginning, 1 Corinthians 9:19-23.

Responding to Misunderstandings: Some lessons from Paul in 1 Cor. 9:19-23...

1. *Understand your freedom (19a)*. Paul begins, “Though I am free and belong to no man...” If you are in Christ, you are forgiven and secure. You are *free*. Affirm that.

Perhaps you can’t say that, because you are not free. You are a slave to sin. But do you desire to be free, my friend? God sent His Son into the world to set sinners free, and if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed! He died to break the chains of sin that have held you captive since birth. And He rose from the dead, and even now, He hears the cry of the slave, “O set me free, Sovereign Lord!” And He will do just that.

He will set you free (lessons one). So you can live as a slave (lesson two).

2. *Live as a slave (19b)*. Is that a contradiction? No. It’s the connection Paul makes in verse 19, “Though I am *free* and belong to no man, I make myself a *slave to everyone*.” If we’re going to respond rightly to misunderstanding and even misrepresentation, we must recognize that God has set us free *to become a slave*.

In other words, we’re free to serve. But we can’t serve unless we choose to take the posture of a servant.

Kent Hughes is right, “Some hearts never risk anything...They desire a temperate zone free from the storms of sin and from the tempests that accompany a life of service. Never burn for the souls of others, and you will avoid rejection. Never suggest a plan to reach the community or the world, and you will never be criticized for it. Never give counsel to someone undergoing the pain of separation or divorce, and you will never give errant advice. But just think of all the heavenly checks you will never cash for yourself or others.”¹³

This brings us to lesson three. One, you are free. Two, now choose to live as a slave.

3. *Remember your objective (19c-22)*. Why did Paul make himself a slave to everyone? He tells us in verse 19, “To win as many as possible.” Listen for the word *win* in his following testimony (1 Cor 9:20-22):

“To the Jews I became like a Jew, to **win** the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to **win** those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law), so as to **win** those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to **win** the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some.”

That’s why Paul took the elders’ charge and participated in the vow. Did he *have to*? No. But he wanted to *win lost people*.

That too is our objective, given to us by Christ Himself. *To win the lost*. Life isn’t about *me*. It’s about winning lost people to Christ, all to the glory of God. And sometimes, God uses misunderstandings to give us a platform to do just that. Therefore...

4. *Live for the gospel, not yourself (23)*. Paul could say, “I do all this *for the sake of the gospel*, that I may share in its blessings.” May that be our resolve as well.

Closing Song: #43 “*Great Is Thy Faithfulness*” (all three verses)

¹³ Ken Hughes, p. 297.

Community Group Discussion:

1. This morning's message was entitled, "*Followers of Christ, Prepare to be Misunderstood.*" Take time to read again today's passage, Acts 21:17-36. What stands out most to you initially when you hear the reading of this passage?

2. In today's text we see the Christian worker (Paul) being misunderstood in two different situations. Who misunderstood him, and what was the nature of the misunderstandings? Take time to discuss both of these carefully.

3. What does it feel like to be misunderstood? What is our natural inclination when we are misunderstood?

4. What do we learn from this passage about living for Jesus in this world? What do we learn about God from this passage?

5. What is something you plan to do this week in light of what you learned today? After sharing, spend time as a group praying about these commitments.