

MISUNDERSTOOD WITNESSES

Series in Acts: Advancing the Gospel

Acts 21:1-16

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I can say with conviction that if you want to be misunderstood, just send a text message. Take the example of the person who lost their contacts and gets a message saying, “I’m here for you.” To which they respond, “Aw, thanks. I’m going through a tough time so it means a lot. Sorry I lost my contacts. Who is this?” “This is your Uber driver. I’m here to pick you up.” “Oh.” If you’ve ever done much texting, you know what it’s like to be misunderstood. You know when you send a text, people don’t hear the tone of your voice, or see the facial expressions and body language. They’re not the best medium for making disciples or really any relationship.

But even in person, if you’re serious about following Jesus—communicating the gospel and making disciples—you’re going to be misunderstood at times. It doesn’t matter how winsome you are, there are always going to be those who misinterpret your message and your motives and really, your calling in Christ. They don’t exactly see the gospel as good news. They don’t see you’re trying to help them. Maybe they become skeptical towards you or distance themselves from you. That can be tough! And if we’re not careful, we can let the fear of that happening shut down our witness for Christ. Today we’re going to learn from Paul’s example how to respond when people misunderstand your calling in Christ. We resume our journey in Acts 21:1-16.

Just a bit of an introduction: we will conclude Paul’s third missionary journey. This passage prepares us for the final section of Acts where Paul enters Jerusalem, testifies about Jesus, is arrested and taken to Rome. This chapter reminds me of tornado season. First, the storm starts brewing and there’s an advisory. Then it develops into a tornado watch. Then there’s a tornado warning. The warnings of persecution at Jerusalem for Paul progressively increase.

I. THE WARNING AT TYRE. (VV. 1-6)

1 When we had parted from them and had set sail, we ran a straight course to Cos and the next day to Rhodes and from there to Patara; 2 and having found a ship crossing over to Phoenicia, we went aboard and set sail. 3 When we came in sight of Cyprus, leaving it on the left, we kept sailing to Syria and landed at Tyre; for there the ship was to unload its cargo. 4 After looking up the disciples, we stayed there seven days; and they kept telling Paul through the Spirit not to set foot in Jerusalem. 5 When our days there were ended, we left and started on our journey, while they all, with wives and children, escorted us until we were out of the city. After kneeling down on the beach and praying, we said farewell to one another. 6 Then we went on board the ship, and they returned home again.

Luke gives us some of the travel details. Paul is on a smaller ship hopping from port to port one day at a time. He leaves **Miletus**, where he met with the Ephesian elders and we sensed the advisory when Paul said, *“I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions await me.”* Then he sails to the island of **Cos**, then the island of **Rhodes**, and then to **Patara** on which was a larger harbor on the south side of Turkey in Lycia. From there he and his 8 companions likely board a larger ship that will take them 400 miles across the Mediterranean to **Tyre** in Phoenicia. **Phoenicia** is a long, narrow strip of land northwest of Galilee in the Lebanon area. This territory was evangelized with the gospel at least in part due to Stephen’s death, the first martyr. Earlier in Acts when persecution broke out against the church, those who were scattered went about preaching the gospel (Acts 11:19). With the theme of persecution today, it’s helpful to take home the idea that God can use persecution to advance the gospel.

Paul and the men with him stay here in **Tyre for 7 days**, apparently while the ship unloads and reloads. As they hang out, they find some Christian brethren to stay with and it says, *“they kept telling Paul through the Spirit not to set foot in Jerusalem.”* The language is admittedly a little difficult here, but from the context we know that this doesn’t mean the Spirit of God was telling Paul not to go to Jerusalem. It means that the Spirit of God revealed to them that Paul was going to be persecuted in Jerusalem and in response to this revelation, *they* (the disciples) were telling him not to go out of loving concern for his well-being. We know that because Paul is compelled by the Spirit (20:22) to go to Jerusalem and a similar, but stronger warning will be given in at his next stop. Paul’s persecution is again foretold, but his journey is not prohibited.

One of the main reasons why we are given this is here is because it shows us God is in control. Things are not spiraling out of control. The misunderstandings about Paul are not a surprise. Nothing has been throughout Acts. Luke emphasizes throughout this book the sovereign hand of God working all things for good and the advancement of the gospel. He will even use Paul’s time in prison for good. It reminds us of Jesus and the way He went to the cross knowing exactly what was going to happen to Him while others misunderstood and tried to stop Him. When you’re misunderstood as a disciple of Jesus, and you want so bad to defend yourself and somehow make people understand, it’s refreshing just to think God is in control.

When misunderstood, remember God is in control.

Not only will unbelievers misunderstand your lifestyle and message as followers of Jesus, but other Christians can even misunderstand your calling in Christ, especially family. Jesus face the same thing. His family called him crazy and He said no prophet is welcome in his hometown. Well-meaning people, even Christians, are always going to have their preconceptions about what you should be doing and know God’s will for your life.

This is particularly true when God calls a man or woman into some sort of difficult ministry. A classic example might be a missionary leaving family to plant a church in some hostile country and the family trying to stop them. How many family members and friends have been

responsible from softening a Christian's calling? We need to understand that God's will for us is not to be happy and pain free all the time. It's to follow Christ and sometimes that means hardship. Jesus said if they persecuted Me, they'll persecute you also. Think about how many difficulties Paul ran into. There's a thousand times Paul could've said, *"It's too hard.. too much opposition... a shipwreck here, a beating there, jail here... it must not be God's will."*

Can you imagine how people felt about Paul? Some of the comments he endured? I imagine after a town was polarized with the gospel; or maybe after the riot at Ephesus; or after some families divided over the gospel; or some of his converts to Christianity died for the faith – that people came up to him and said, *"Don't you think you're taking this whole Jesus and gospel thing too seriously? It's causing division. Disturbing the peace. People are losing their lives, Paul. You're taking this evangelism thing too far... everything in moderation, Paul."* How many flaming arrows like that did the enemy launch at Paul (Eph. 6:17)? But if you really understand the gospel, that the gospel is the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes (Rom 1:16) – that one must hear and believe it to be eternally saved – the most loving thing you can do is share the gospel. We should all have such an understanding of the gospel that we could say with Paul, *"Woe to me if I don't preach the gospel!"* (1 Cor. 9:16). This is about eternal destinies.

7 When we had finished the voyage from Tyre, we arrived at Ptolemais, and after greeting the brethren, we stayed with them for a day. 8 On the next day we left and came to Caesarea, and entering the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, we stayed with him. 9 Now this man had four virgin daughters who were prophetesses. 10 As we were staying there for some days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. 11 And coming to us, he took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands, and said, "This is what the Holy Spirit says: 'In this way the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.'" 12 When we had heard this, we as well as the local residents began begging him not to go up to Jerusalem. 13 Then Paul answered, "What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound, but even to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." 14 And since he would not be persuaded, we fell silent, remarking, "The will of the Lord be done!" 15 After these days we got ready and started on our way up to Jerusalem. 16 Some of the disciples from Caesarea also came with us, taking us to Mnason of Cyprus, a disciple of long standing with whom we were to lodge." [There the third and final missionary journey ends.]

II. INTENSIFIED WARNING AT CAESAREA. (VV. 7-14)

Paul and the 8 men with him end up at **Ptolemais**, located about 30 miles south of Tyre, where they run into more disciples and stay with them for a day. Don't you love how everywhere they go now, they are finding Christian brothers and sisters? It's great. It's the result of a church being faithful to her call to share the gospel. After Ptolemais, they traveled 40 miles south to **Caesarea**. Caesarea Maritima, meaning "the city of Caesar by the sea," is a city we are familiar with already in Acts and will become more familiar with as Paul is jailed here for 2 years. This is where Herod Agrippa I died and was eaten by worms (12:20-23). This is where Peter preached

the gospel to the Gentiles at Cornelius' house. It was almost a purely Gentile city; the Roman capital in Israel that to the Jew, represented everything wrong with Israel. But it was magnificent city and posterchild of Roman engineering. Founded by Herod the Great, one of the neat features was a manmade harbor stretching over 300 yards into the sea, made from concrete that hardened underwater, a technology that was lost for centuries. But it's Paul's last chance to turn around.

And it's here that we run into a familiar character named **Philip**. This is not Philip the apostle, but Philip the evangelist. Like Stephen the martyr, he is **one of the seven** men chosen in Acts 6 to serve as deacons, serving tables in the early church. In time, he becomes a powerful witness in Samaria, led the Ethiopian eunuch to the Lord, and then was snatched away and ended up in Caesarea last time we saw him (8:4-40). Turns out, Caesarea become his home.

Philip also has four unmarried **daughters** who all have the gift of prophesy (not unfamiliar to the NT; 1 Cor. 11:5; 14:34-35; 1 Tim 2:11-12). In the days of Acts before the completion of the Bible and before NT theology was written, some Christians had the gift of prophesy. According to early church writings, Philip's family appears to have later migrated to Hierapolis in Asia (western Turkey) in the Lycus Valley where their tombs were pointed out in the late 2nd century.¹ The daughters in particular were noted as being *"highly esteemed informants on persons and events belonging to the early years of Judean Christianity."*²

I think that explains why Luke makes passing mention of them and individuals like **Mnason**, like **Agabus**, like **Philip**, and the leaders at Jerusalem like **James** (21:18). He's subtly, but intentionally, indicating trusted sources of the information he gathered to compile the gospel of Luke and book of Acts (Luke 1:1-4; Acts 1:1). His information comes from **early eyewitnesses** who were there from the beginning. As he travels and runs into these people, or while Paul is imprisoned at Caesarea for 2 years, he is busy collecting and organizing the eyewitness information that ultimately finalizes as Luke and Acts.

After Philip's daughters, the prophet **Agabus** is mentioned. Apparently, prophets of a feather flock together. The last time we saw him was Acts 11:28 when he and some other prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch and foretold a great famine. Being the bearer of bad news again, he comes down to warn Paul about his fate, and rather dramatically. Like on OT prophet who used illustrations, Agabus takes Paul's **belt** – maybe the money belt that held the monetary gift from the Gentile churches for the saints of Jerusalem – and he predicts Paul will be bound as a result of Jewish opposition. Jews won't necessarily bind him but will be responsible for it.

Agabus and the others, including Luke, try to convince Paul not to go to Jerusalem. To this, Paul says, *"What are you doing weeping and breaking my heart? I'm not only ready to be bound but to die for the name of the Lord Jesus."* Paul understands this is what God has called him to do and their attempts to soften his determination to follow the Lord is heartbreaking for him. But Paul won't be persuaded away from God's will and calling on his life and they finally quit trying. It says they, *"fall silent, remarking, 'The will of the Lord be done!'"*

One might read this and mistakenly think that martyrdom brings special merits before God – that it’s something to be pursued. One might think Paul has a death wish. But that’s not at all the case. Sometimes Paul moved on when persecution flared up. Other times, he didn’t. Paul was just following God’s lead and staying true to God’s calling on his life. When Jesus called Paul on the road to Damascus, He said, *“I will show him how much he must suffer for My name’s sake.”* He was to bear witness before Jews, Gentiles, and Kings (Acts 9:16). Since then, Paul has been suffering for the gospel. He has been beaten and jailed and stoned and misunderstood. He will be falsely accused and not treated justly. Paul didn’t choose suffering. God had called him and that calling would entail suffering for Christ’s sake.

One of the interesting parallels we keep sensing here in Paul’s final journey to Jerusalem is the parallels with Jesus’ final journey to Jerusalem. 1) Both predict it is God who is leading them to Jerusalem, 2) both set their face like flint to go to Jerusalem one last time knowing full well what will happen, and 3) both have disciples who try to stop them out of loving concern. But in both cases, Jesus and Paul continue to choose God’s will though it is not easy and though others just don’t understand. In both accounts the remark is found: *“The will of the Lord be done!”* And Jesus, wrestling with the Father in Gethsemane said, *“Not My will, but yours be done.”* Countless Christians throughout the centuries have all said the same thing, from Polycarp (Apostle John’s disciple) to Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1945). *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs* tells the story of countless Christians standing before emperors and popes, giving their lives for the true gospel. There are times when God says to His saints that it’s time to move on. Persecution is coming. And there are times when like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, God says it’s time to stay and testify. It’s something you discern through a relationship with Him.

When misunderstood, keep prioritizing the will of God.

When you’re misunderstood by others; when people shun you or question your motives or gospel message; when people say things like, *“You’re taking this whole Jesus and evangelism thing too far”*... the naysayers start to get to you and your emotions... you know what you need to do? You need to prioritize the will of God. *“The will of Lord be done!”* That’s what Jesus did. That’s what Paul did. Acts 20:24, *“But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God.”* Paul placed his calling in Christ before his own life. It wasn’t about Paul and Paul’s will and Paul’s feelings. It was about God and God’s eternal purposes. Not Paul’s story but God’s story. God’s story gave meaning and purpose to his story.

I find it incredibly helpful to think of life in terms of 2 stories. There is God’s overarching, metanarrative story that He is writing from eternity past to eternity future. Then there is my story, which is like a little blip on the radar that exists for a moment, then is gone. The only way my story is going to have any real, eternal, or deeply rewarding significance is if my story is connected to and becomes part of God’s story. My story can be here one day and gone the next, but if connected to God’s story, it will last forever. Live or die, our stories can be part of something that will matter forever. Like Paul, we need to prioritize our heavenward call.

Sometimes we hear that word “call” or “calling” and think it only refers pastors and missionaries. I do believe there is a certain call to vocational ministry, but in a wide sense, every believer in Jesus Christ has been **called**. To be called means to be summoned; to be appointed. It’s like you’ve been drafted into heaven’s army. You got the call and have new calling. A new mission. A new purpose. When the Jews heard the call of the shofar, the ram’s horn, the trumpet, in the land of Israel, they knew they were being called to something great. As Christians, we all have a great call from God to represent Jesus and make disciples and advance the gospel.

Romans 1:6-7 says, “*you... are the called of Jesus Christ... called as saints.*” To be a saint is to be set apart for God. You’re not like the world. You’re different. You’re like Jesus. **Ephesians 4:1** says you are to “*walk worthy of the calling with which you’ve been called.*” If you want to know what walking worthy of your calling looks like, read the rest of Ephesians beyond that. It means walking by faith in Christ; conducting yourself with integrity; having a certain fortitude in a painful spiritual war; we put on Christ, the new man and put off the old man, the sin nature. But ultimately, by walking with Jesus and applying Scriptures, we fulfill our heavenly calling to represent Jesus to the world and make disciples, advancing the gospel.

We might think of calling in a narrow sense. Paul said he was **called** to be an apostle. I was called to be a pastor. You might be called to some other ministry in the church or function in the church. You might be called to be a stay-at-home mom or a mechanic or farmer or rancher or nurse or business owner or pizza maker. Whatever you do, it matters if you see it in light of your heavenward call. But it’s helpful to think that these are specific platforms through, or from which we fulfill **our heavenly calling to represent Jesus, advance the gospel, and make disciples for the glory of God.**³ No matter where you are at in life, you can fulfill your heavenly calling. And when people throw stones or call names or try to soften your call to discipleship, remember that call because it comes before all else.

When misunderstood, remember your heavenly calling.

Remember we are called to be different. You are called to stand out like a light in the darkness. You are called as saints – chosen ones set apart for the glory of God. The recent passing of my classmate and friend has me thinking lately about those words we spent a sermon on last year: “*Life is a gift.*” My friend finished his race strong. I can’t help but think, “*That could’ve been me. Why him and not me?*” And if it was me, would I be satisfied with how I carried out my calling? I want to finish my race like a runner giving it their all and not looking back, be able to say, “*The will of the Lord was done in my life.*” Every day let’s live in light of the heavenward call in Christ Jesus.

¹ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 638.

² F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, Rev. ed. (NICNT; Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 400.

³ Bryan Clark, *Daring to be the Church Series: Come and Die*. <https://www.lincolnberean.org/sermon-serie/daring-to-be-the-church-acts/>