

Tusculum Hills Baptist Church
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THE PROBLEM WITH ASSUMPTIONS

October 10, 2021

Acts 21:3-4, 8-14, 17-24, 26-29, 33-39

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There are four points to today's sermon:

- Christians assumed Paul should not go to Jerusalem.
- Jewish believers assumed Paul disregarded the law.
- Jews assumed Paul defiled the temple.
- The Romans assumed Paul was a rebel.

CHRISTIANS ASSUMED PAUL SHOULD NOT GO TO JERUSALEM

SCRIPTURE: Acts 21:3-4, 8-14

After sighting Cyprus and passing to the south of it, we sailed on to Syria. We landed at Tyre, where our ship was to unload its cargo. ⁴ We sought out the disciples there and stayed with them seven days. Through the Spirit they urged Paul not to go on to Jerusalem... ⁸ Leaving the next day, we reached Caesarea and stayed at the house of Philip the evangelist, one of the Seven. ⁹ He had four unmarried daughters who prophesied. ¹⁰ After we had been there a number of days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. ¹¹ Coming over to us, he took Paul's belt, tied his own hands and feet with it and said, "The Holy Spirit says, 'In this way the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles.'" ¹² When we heard this, we and the people there pleaded with Paul not to go up to Jerusalem. ¹³ Then Paul answered, "Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." ¹⁴ When he would not be dissuaded, we gave up and said, "The Lord's will be done."

EXPLANATION: Paul was en route to Jerusalem to deliver a love offering that Gentile churches had collected for the Jerusalem church. In chapters 19 and 20, Paul mentioned that he decided "in the spirit" or that he was compelled "by the spirit" to make this trip. Yet, in this passage, we see that other believers claim in the

spirit that he should not go. Who was right? Was Paul supposed to go to Jerusalem, or was he being head-strong and disobedient in going when the Holy Spirit warned him of the persecution to come?

The original Greek word for spirit—pneuma (pnyoo'-mah)—(notice the similarity to our word pneumonia) can mean a person's spirit, a ghost or spiritual being, wind, breath, or Holy Spirit. The only way interpreters know which meaning is correct is to examine the usage and context of the sentence. Luke, used the term "spirit" almost 70 times in the book of Acts. Most of the time when Luke talked about the Spirit of God, he wrote Holy Spirit. In other cases, he added words such as "unclean spirit" or "spirit of the Lord." In this way, Luke helped readers to know exactly what usage of the word he wished to convey.

Theologians and scholars have long argued over this, but I believe Luke intentionally did not write Holy Spirit because he was referring to the human spirit, the rational part of a human that feels, thinks, wills, and decides.

The Holy Spirit had clearly stated that there would be persecution and problems for Paul in Jerusalem. Paul, however, made his own decision about whether or not to go there at this specific time. Fellow believers made up their minds that Paul should not go and tried to persuade him to that end.

ILLUSTRATION: God's word is true. It's true for all people in all places at all times. However, how God's word is applied in each person's life may vary depending on circumstances, personalities, cultures, and times in history. For example, God calls all believers to share the gospel. However, God does not call all believers to be pastors. God calls all believers to modesty, but some Christian women choose to fulfill that command by wearing only dresses. He has given us a certain amount of freedom and flexibility within his commands.

EXPLANATION: Paul took the gospel seriously and made a decision to go to Jerusalem despite promised persecution. Paul's friends and fellow Christians, also having confirmation of Paul's upcoming trials, did not feel that Paul's trip was necessary at this specific time. I think that as long as Paul continued to evangelize the lost, he could not have made a mistake. Whether he went to Jerusalem or continued sharing the gospel elsewhere, Paul would have been in God's will. Like the believers who assumed Paul would not go to Jerusalem because hardship

awaited, we often assume things based on our opinions. In the end, they left it all to God's will. After all, his opinion is the only one that really matters.

JEWISH BELIEVERS ASSUMED PAUL DISREGARDED THE LAW

SCRIPTURE: Acts 21:17-24

When we arrived at Jerusalem, the brothers and sisters received us warmly. ¹⁸ The next day Paul and the rest of us went to see James, and all the elders were present. ¹⁹ Paul greeted them and reported in detail what God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. ²⁰ When they heard this, they praised God. Then they said to Paul: “You see, brother, how many thousands of Jews have believed, and all of them are zealous for the law. ²¹ 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. ²² What shall we do? They will certainly hear that you have come, ²³ so do what we tell you. There are four men with us who have made a vow. ²⁴ Take these men, join in their purification rites and pay their expenses, so that they can have their heads shaved. Then everyone will know there is no truth in these reports about you, but that you yourself are living in obedience to the law.

EXPLANATION: Christ did not come to abolish the law. He fulfilled it. Jewish Christians were no longer under an obligation to the strict rules that had been forced upon them. However, there were still many aspects of the Jewish heritage that they might participate in if they wanted. For example, a few chapters back we discussed how Paul made a vow in which he allowed his hair to grow for some length of time. Then, as an act of praise and thanksgiving, he cut it and sacrificed it to the Lord.

Unfortunately, the law was still a point of contention. In an effort to appease the Jewish leaders, Paul agreed to participate in the ritual.

ILLUSTRATION: In 1853, when Hudson Taylor began his foreign ministry, he made a radical decision. He chose to dress like the Chinamen to whom he was ministering. He even grew his hair and wore it in a pigtail. Hudson must have thought that he could share the gospel more effectively by finding a common ground in appearance. Paul realized that some Jewish believers did not yet understand their complete freedom in Christ. Like Hudson, he chose to be “all things to all people” to help create a more conducive atmosphere for the gospel.

APPLICATION: Some people assumed that Paul was telling Jewish Christians to do away with the law, but he was actually pointing them to the fulfillment of all that the law had promised, pointed to, and pictured. Our assumptions are also sometimes a result of wrong thinking. 1 John 4:1 reminds us that we should test the spirits to see if they are from God. Jewish believers who assumed Paul was callous towards the law should have examined what he was saying based on his character, his actions, and the evidence of God’s work in his life. When you do not know if what someone is saying is true, compare it to the truth you do know.

JEWS ASSUMED PAUL DEFILED THE TEMPLE

SCRIPTURE: Acts 21:26-29

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. ²⁷ When the seven days were nearly over, some Jews from the province of Asia saw Paul at the temple. They stirred up the whole crowd and seized him, ²⁸ shouting, “Fellow Israelites, help us! This is the man who teaches everyone everywhere against our people and our law and this place. And besides, he has brought Greeks into the temple and defiled this holy place.” ²⁹ (They had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian in the city with Paul and assumed that Paul had brought him into the temple.)

EXPLANATION: The temple was a segregated place. There was a court for women. There was an area for Gentiles. There was a place for Jewish men, and then there were certain locations that were reserved for the priests. Temple guests knew their places and stayed within them.

Jews who had seen Paul with a Gentile friend earlier in the day, assumed that he brought the Gentile into an area in which he was not allowed. There was no reason for this assumption since the man was not with Paul at this time.

ILLUSTRATION: Murphy’s law is a fictitious law of nature that states, “Whatever can go wrong will.” It’s like when your drain gets stopped up. In the process of trying to unclog it, you somehow crack the pipe. On the way to shut off the water main, you slip and fall and twist your ankle. Sometimes you just feel like you cannot win. Once I was going to save all this money and tune up my car myself and instead, I cross-threaded a spark plug.

I wonder if Paul felt that way? I wonder if he thought whatever can go wrong will go wrong because his reunion with the church at Jerusalem wasn't going so well. Paul went to the temple in order to try to appease his Jewish brothers and help promote peace. Unfortunately, his very presence in the temple stirred up more trouble. Had it not been such a serious matter, he may have found their accusations laughable.

APPLICATION: The Jews assumed that Paul had defiled the temple. Little did they realize that by rejecting the son of God, they were in fact defaming the God they claimed to serve. Assumptions like this are often made in haste. We do not have all the facts, but we feel as if we need to make a declaration anyway. Proverbs 25:8 warns not to make hasty accusations. "Do not hastily bring into court, for what will you do in the end, when your neighbor puts you to shame?"

Probably about ten years ago, something was stolen out of a coat pocket that was hanging up. A person was convinced the thief was a certain boy. The person who accused him said she saw him in the area where the coat was hanging. She described him, including his approximate height, and the colors of clothes he was wearing. In tears, he told me it wasn't him. At times he could be very mischievous, but I believed him. After the truth came out, the thief was another boy who was similar in appearance and was wearing the same color of clothing.

On a more serious note, I heard a radio news program with the story of wrongful convictions in the state of Texas, because juries and judges moved too fast. In fact, numerous people who were on death row in Texas were exonerated, and others were wrongly executed and only proven not guilty after their deaths. A gruesome bit of news, but yet another illustration of what happens when people assume something. It's best to not have hasty assumptions and conclusions about things.

THE ROMANS ASSUMED PAUL WAS A REBEL

SCRIPTURE: Acts 21:33-39

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. ³⁴ 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.

³⁵ When Paul reached the steps, the violence of the mob was so great he had to be

carried by the soldiers.³⁶ The crowd that followed kept shouting, “Get rid of him!”³⁷ As the soldiers were about to take Paul into the barracks, he asked the commander, “May I say something to you?” “Do you speak Greek?” he replied.³⁸ “Are not you the Egyptian who started a revolt and led four thousand terrorists out into the wilderness some time ago?”³⁹ Paul answered, “I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no ordinary city. Please let me speak to the people.”

EXPLANATION: The Romans came to the rescue—sort of. Had they not stepped in, it’s likely that Paul would have been beaten to death by the angry mob. When they tried to discern what Paul had done to be treated so poorly, they were met with a variety of responses. The mob participants obviously did not even know why they were beating Paul, but they arrested him anyway.

Here’s another example of what I’ve pointed out many times: avoid mob mentality.

APPLICATION: The Romans could not know what they did not know. The crowd was not helpful in identifying Paul or his supposed crimes. So, they filled in the blanks for themselves. Of course, Paul was not trying to free the Jews from Rome; he was introducing them to Christ who could free them from their sin. We should not allow ignorance to be a reason for assumptions. Proverbs 18:13 reminds us that it is shameful to give an answer before we have asked or listened to the question. “To answer before listening— that is folly and shame.”

- Christians assumed Paul should not go to Jerusalem.
- Jewish believers assumed Paul disregarded the law.
- Jews assumed Paul defiled the temple.
- The Romans assumed Paul was a rebel.

All of their assumptions were wrong!

APPLICATION: An assumption is the acceptance of something as being true without proof to verify the claim. Whether we make assumptions based on our opinion, as a result of wrong-thinking, in haste, or out of ignorance, assumptions can be a problem because they often lead to harmful attitudes and actions. Paul understood the problems associated with making hasty assumptions.

CONCLUSION: For my closing, I want to point out that what the people were upset about with Paul was rooted in their misunderstanding about what it means to truly be a Christian. They could not embrace the new covenant and faith in Christ alone as the basis of true salvation. They could not let go of the older rituals and felt they must be incorporated in the new way of believing in Jesus. They had a very hard time believing it is Jesus and nothing else.

And think of it. The last thing a true follower of Christ would do would be to have the strongest, boldest follower of Christ put to death. And so Paul claimed his Roman citizenship once again which gave him a reprieve from the bondage of the Roman soldiers.

True followers of Jesus Christ understand it is Jesus and nothing else.

True followers of Jesus Christ understand that one cannot simply love Christ while at the same time wanting to put to death one of his followers.

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