

2 WAYS TO HANDLE FALSE ACCUSATIONS

Acts 21:17-36

Many Americans were riveted to the television over recent weeks. It was not to watch in anticipation when and where Derek Jeter would climb aboard the wagon joining others in the coveted 3,000 hit club or to see if the USA women's soccer team would bring home the world cup. Neither has it been to watch the outcome of political parties sparring over the mounting debt of our nation.

Many Americans tuned in to watch the high profile case of Casey Anthony on trial for the death of her little girl and many more tuned in to hear the verdict delivered this past week. While I myself did not watch any of the trial, I did catch snippets via the news and the internet. Whether you disagree with the verdict or not one theme rang constant throughout the trial as reported from the various journalists recapping the day's activities inside the courtroom. Every day there was discussion about whether some witnesses giving testimony were telling the truth or lying. Allegations and accusations were spoken that made everyone's head swirl so that reality and fantasy were mixed into what I will call "realisy". Testimony was given from one family member about another whether true or false that cast a reasonable doubt in the minds of the jurors.

Lying and false accusations are so complex. Pretty soon the lie is so fabricated it's really difficult to decipher the truth, especially when so many are involved in the ruse.

That's what seemed to be taking place during this trial, trying to remember all the testimonies of what had been said. In the end, though acquitted of the accusations of murder, only Casey Anthony knows the real truth about what happened to Caylee.

Scripture documents for us a number of individuals who suffered wrongly because of false accusations.

It really started in the garden when Satan falsely accused God before Adam and Eve of withholding the real truth from them. He cast doubt about God. Their believing the false accusations cost them fellowship with God as they were put out of the Garden because of their sin.

One day while performing his normal duties as servant to Potiphar Joseph was falsely accused by Potiphar's wife because he wouldn't accept her sexual advances. There was no appeal process for slaves like him. Without legal representation false accusations cost Joseph several years in the pokey.

Absalom made false accusations about his father, King David, at the gate of Jerusalem that led to a short revolt and the death of Absalom.

There was the time King Ahab grumbled to his wife, Jezebel, about being turned down by Naboth to purchase a vineyard adjacent to the palace. It was a beautiful vineyard and Ahab wanted it, but Naboth wouldn't sell it. Jezebel spun a plot by paying two guys to spread false accusations about Naboth that brought the death penalty.

Daniel was falsely accused by those who hated him for his integrity. His enemies devised a plan and brought the accusations to the attention of the king and Daniel was thrown into the lion's den.

Jesus was falsely accused by the religious leaders because of their jealousy of Him. It resulted in His crucifixion.

Stephen was falsely accused by the Sanhedrin and stoned to death.

Twist the truth here a little and leave out some of the truth there and a false accusation is easily spun.

Our text today reveals a series of false accusations against the apostle Paul by a group of Christians, by a group of Jews and by Roman soldiers. **How does**

Paul respond? How should a Jesus follower respond when falsely accused? This passage provides two ways we can respond when falsely accused. Turn to **Acts 21:17-36**.

A Jesus follower talks with honesty.

A Jesus follower walks with humility.

I. A JESUS FOLLOWER TALKS WITH HONESTY – v. 17-19

Paul had been away from Jerusalem for several years. Since his conversion on the road to Damascus we only have three recorded trips to Jerusalem by Paul. You will remember that initially after leaving Damascus he headed back to Jerusalem and tried to align himself with the Christians there but they wouldn't have anything to do with him. He was that persecutor of the church. That kind of reputation isn't easily overlooked. Believers were very skeptical of this guy who now claimed to be a Christian. They thought it was just a way to get in and find out who was a Jesus follower so that he could arrest them. They believed he was on a big sting operation.

I counseled at Camp with a guy who after college became part of the DEA. He was undercover a lot and part of some pretty big drug busts. They had to infiltrate and get close to the bad guys to make arrests that would stick.

No way were these believers going to let Saul near them. They were afraid. But Barnabas came alongside and helped him out, became his friend.

Acts 15 records the second trip to Jerusalem. This was at the bidding of the church in Antioch when some Judaizers were claiming that a Gentile is saved by trusting in Jesus and keeping the Law. The church wanted clarification so they sent Paul and Barnabas as delegates to get an answer from the Apostles in Jerusalem.

Paul has arrived once more in Jerusalem for what will be his final visit. He has brought the contribution from the Gentile church. Interestingly nothing is mentioned by Luke about this gift as he records these events. His focus is on another more important matter that reveals the character of Paul.

As they arrive this small band of travelers was warmly greeted by the believers in Jerusalem. It was an informal meeting. Paul's past reputation is all but distant memory now for those who were part of the early church undergoing persecution at the hands of Paul prior to his conversion. Many of the newer Christians would only know about him by the stories told of how the older Christians endured hardship for their faith. They would hear about what great things Paul was doing now to share the gospel and only hearing that, hard to believe, he once persecuted the church.

It would be like telling stories about Billy Sunday who was considered the most influential evangelist of the first two decades of the 20th century. We could retell about his evangelistic campaigns and how many people got saved and oh, by the way, did you know he was a professional baseball player in the 1880's. While he was never a heavy drinker, he did gamble some but after his conversion gave up drinking, gambling and swearing. This is what he once was, but this is who he is now, a changed man.

That Paul was a different man because of Christ was evident to all and this arrival in Jerusalem was met with a very warm reception. After a long journey it was nice to catch up with the believers.

The next day after a time of rest and refreshment Paul had a formal meeting with the church leaders to report on what had taken place since his previous meeting with them. To recap, turn to **Acts 15:22-30**.

At this point in the history of the Jerusalem church it is clear that James had become the primary leader. James was the half-brother of Jesus and the author

of the book in the New Testament that bears his name. He has become the head guy in the Jerusalem church. The elders who are with James in this meeting probably comprised all the other church leaders who had spiritual oversight of the growing church in Jerusalem. Some believe there may have been as many as 70 or more in this gathering, a number similar to the Jewish Sanhedrin

Paul greeted them and proceeded to give a very detailed account of his travels and all that God had done during the two missionary journeys following his previous visit. We don't know if this included a report about the separation between him and Barnabas as Barnabas had been a part of the previous meeting and charged as well with delivering the letter to the Gentile churches. We do know that he reported everything that was happening among the Gentiles and how the gospel was spreading up into the regions of Europe.

It's not any different than when our missionaries come and share what God is doing through their efforts. They give an account of their activity. He would have outlined his travels, where he went, how long he was there, what had been taught. Paul had been appointed Apostle to the Gentiles. In between these two separate visits to Jerusalem that took several years he had been part of and witness to thousands of people who had come to know Christ as Savior. What an exciting time for the church as it was. He would have no doubt spoken about how the Gospel was not only well received but also recounted how the Gospel message was challenged in every city, that among those who challenged the message were Jews who wanted to add to the salvation experience. This would have included the hardships and trials, but to Paul it was worth it in order to spread the gospel.

Paul had a reputation for honesty. That's how a Jesus follower talks. It could have been very easy for Paul to embellish the truth a little, to pad the stats and make it look like greater things were

happening. He could have made it sound like he had done great things, built up his name and his credentials, but no, his report was an accurate rendering of what God was doing. It was all about building God's kingdom by being honest.

A Pastor friend of mine tells about his days playing football at UofM. He would tell people that he played across from Mean Joe Greene, who went on to play for the Pittsburg Stealers. What my friend said was true – to a point. It was true that he played across from this football superstar. But what he would fail to say is that he lined up on one end of the offensive line while Mean Joe Greene lined up on defense at the other end of the line. My friend never actually lined up across from him face to face. It's easy to embellish a story.

I could tell you that I once sang and played guitar in a band. What I knowingly left out was that a group of classmates in fourth grade went around to other classes with homemade paper guitars and drums singing songs from the Monkeys.

When it comes to giving a report about what we are doing, how honest are we? Speaking honestly is a sign of a Jesus follower. He or she will not embellish the truth just to look good.

Leviticus 19:11

Acts 24:16

I Peter 2:11-12

Ephesians 4:15

Every day in some way we are confronted with the opportunity to exaggerate the truth. Friends, it's easy to make something sound better so we look good or make someone else look not so good. Paul could have added to his accomplishments about what was happening in the Gentile churches and they would have never been the wiser. But Paul knew and Paul knew God knew. In a short while as Paul would give testimony about his actions before Felix he could honestly state that he had a clear conscience before God and others. A Jesus

follower will be honest and speak truthfully in all situations. There are no regrets and there is no guilt for the Jesus follower who is honest. Paul shared about what was happening in the Gentile churches and everyone was very excited and praising God. A Jesus follower talks with honesty.

A second character trait that I see in this passage about a Jesus follower is that a Jesus follower walks with humility.

II. A JESUS FOLLOWER WALKS WITH HUMILITY – v. 20-36

Have you ever been part of something good only to have the atmosphere of excitement squashed?

How would you feel if your boss just told you that your efforts on the job were outstanding and worthy of a raise only to find out in the next breath that you were being down sized?

How would you feel if your teacher came to you and told you that on your last test you got an “A” but proceeded to tell you that you failed the class?

Paul just finished reporting to the church leadership that the Church was growing remarkably. Everyone was rejoicing because of God’s grace among the Gentiles but in the very next sentence the excitement was doused like a big bucket of water on a camp fire.

James addressed Paul about a rumor that had been floating around town. It is the first of the false accusations brought against Paul in this passage. A rumor is a piece of information that is general talk not based on definite knowledge; gossip, hearsay. **Someone has rightly said that a rumor doesn’t have a leg to stand on, but it travels mighty fast.**

James said in effect “Paul, we’re really excited about all that God is doing in the Gentile world. As a matter of fact, the church here in Jerusalem is

growing as well with many, many more Jews coming to embrace Christ as Savior. They are very zealous about their faith and continue to follow the Law. But, Paul, there’s some troubling news that has been spread around town about you. Some of the Jewish Christians are stating that you are telling them that it’s okay to denounce their Jewish cultural traditions while living among the Gentiles. They’re saying you are telling them they don’t have to circumcise their children or to follow other Jewish customs. What are we going to do about these rumors?”

It was probably not what Paul was expecting to hear at that moment. Jewish Christians were accusing Paul of something that was a total fabrication of the truth. This was something that Paul had dealt with in many of the cities where he ministered. Judaizers were all over claiming that a person is saved by keeping both the Mosaic Law and by faith in Christ. They were claiming that Paul was turning his back on his Jewish heritage.

Before we go any further in this passage I want you to keep this in mind about Paul. The accusations against him are unfounded.

1. While Paul was in Corinth you will recall that took a Nazarite vow. **(18:18)**
2. While testifying before Felix **(24:17-18)** Paul stated he came to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices to God.
3. While writing to the Corinthians he stated that his ministry was doing whatever it took, to be all things to all people so that some would get saved. **I Corinthians 9:19-23 - “Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. 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...I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I**

may share in its blessings.” Paul’s desire in this trip through the report given and the contribution provided was to unify the Jewish and Gentile Christians.

4. By submitting to the direction of the leaders, Paul did not negate Christ’s death on the cross. To him these vows and rituals were memorials of what Christ did.
5. Paul would later state that he did not violate his conscience (**23:1; 24:16**).
6. While traveling with Timothy for the sake of ministering to Jews in the cities they would visit, he had Timothy circumcised to show respect to his Jewish heritage and their customs and so be a witness for Christ.

I have in the past mentioned to you that my heritage includes the Mennonite traditions. It was a Wideman who moved to and started the first Mennonite church in Canada that is still there today. Fairview is a predominantly Mennonite community. When we would visit the church in town Mom would always wear a head covering out of respect for their tradition, that women cover their heads.

The leaders didn’t believe the report but asked Paul to clarify just for the record. By this time Paul had written both to the Romans and to the Galatians and stated clearly his position on the matter. A person regardless of cultural upbringing was saved only by faith in Christ. He clearly states that salvation does not nor did it ever come by keeping the law. As a matter of fact, after this council there was a book written to the Hebrews that being Hebrew does not save a person. Barnhouse writes that **“the book of Hebrews was written to Hebrews to tell them to stop being Hebrews.”** Following those traditions will not save a person.

So why did James and the other church leaders ask Paul to join four Jewish Christians in their vow which was clearly a Jewish tradition? It was a way for him to show the Jews the respect he still had for the traditions of Judaism but he was very clear to

state that keeping them did not save a person. These men who had taken this vow were Christians. One author rightly observed that once they were saved the meaning of the Jewish customs became clear. They could see how they all pointed to Christ and so were all the more eager in their new faith to observe this Nazarite vow because they understood the typology and the surrender to God.

The church leaders were telling Paul that what was being said about him if true would jeopardize their efforts of reaching unbelieving Jews in Jerusalem with the gospel. Do this and it will go a long way to smooth things out and take the wind out of the sails of false accusations.

So Paul submitted to their request and became their sponsor. He would pay for their expenses. While he was going to the Temple near the end of this seven day purification he was again falsely accused. This time it was by the Jews, Asian Jews. Remember that Paul had spent two years in Ephesus. They claimed that Paul had brought a Gentile into the Temple beyond where Gentiles were allowed. Earlier in the week they had seen Paul and Trophimus in the city together. Trophimus was from Ephesus and they assumed that Paul had taken him into the Temple.

Gentiles were allowed into an area of the Temple that was designated specifically for Gentiles but weren’t allowed to go beyond that point. Two signs have been found on a railing at the Temple site warning Gentiles not to enter any further or they could only blame themselves for their deaths. The Roman government gave the Jews permission to carry out the death sentence on any Gentile who violated this law even if it was a Roman citizen.

Why would Paul knowingly violate the law when he was trying to show deference to it? These Jews were attempting to ruin the credibility of the gospel and of Paul. They incited a riot claiming that Paul was himself anti-Semitic, that he was opposed to

the Law, and that he spoke against the Temple. Not wanting to spill blood in the Temple, they grabbed him and took him outside and began to beat him. Almost instantaneously Roman soldiers arrived on the scene. During the reign of Herod the Great he had a fort called the fortress of Antonia built adjacent to the Temple wall. The towers overlooked the Temple. If any difficulty broke out, it was usually during the Jewish festivals. Security was often enhanced during this time. Being the celebration of Pentecost more troops were on hand. The commander who arrived and arrested Paul would have been over 1,000 soldiers. The centurions or officers he brought with him indicate there were at least 200 soldiers to help break up the riot. They also made a false accusation about Paul because they immediately believe he was some insurrectionist and trouble maker and handcuffed him. Notice how unruly the crowd was.

When asked to give details about what Paul had done that incited the behavior in beating him, no one could give him a straight answer. If they were such adherents to the Law, why then did they bring conflicting accusations against him even though the law clearly states that any accusations are only to be brought at the testimony of two or three witnesses? Apparently those who had stirred up the crowd had exited stage left. They didn't want to be charged with starting the riot with a false accusation.

Notice also that when the soldiers were attempting to take Paul away for his own safety the crowd continued to press in on them so that they had to hoist him up on their shoulders to protect him. The crowd shouted "away with him," which literally means they wanted him to be killed.

It's the same reaction that happened against Jesus and about 25 years earlier against Stephen. Paul may well have been remembering that day as he's being ushered off. This time though he is on the other side of the fray.

We have noticed in the first couple of verses that a Jesus follower talks with honesty. From this section I want you to see that a Jesus follower walks with humility. Humility has been defined by Webster's as the state of being humble, the absence of pride or self-assertion.

Rightly understood, humility recognizes dependence on God. It's a submission to God and doing His will rather than asserting our will on a matter. Humility begins at salvation when we recognize that we cannot save ourselves, that it is only by the grace of God as we trust His plan for salvation rather than in pride believing that I can do it or that I have something to do with it. Humility recognizes that it's all about God. Scripture says that God gives grace to the humble. It is both saving grace and sanctifying grace, grace to be saved and grace to live the Christian life.

I hope you see that in Paul in this passage. To the Ephesians Paul wrote **"Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love." (4:2)**

To the Romans Paul wrote **"For by the grace given me I say to everyone one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you." (Romans 12:3)** Humility.

Paul never challenged the leadership about their request to join those four Jewish Christians in their vow. He could have claimed all kinds of accomplishments. He could have cited his spiritual achievements and expected acclaim because of all his travels and how much he had suffered for Christ. He could have mentioned the letters he had written to the various churches. He could have challenged the Jews with how much a Jew he really was, but he didn't. He could have boasted about a lot, but there was only one thing worth boasting about - knowing Christ. The only thing worth boasting about was

Christ and the cross. He was nothing, God was everything. His walk was one of humility – always putting Christ first, always putting others before himself so that many might be saved. **Is our walk humble so that people will see Christ?**

In Paul's day there was no word in the Latin or the Greek for humility. A true Greek or Roman wanted to exalt himself not think of himself in a lowly fashion. But according to **James 4:6**, God doesn't give grace to the exalted, he gives grace to the humble. Yet paradoxically it is the humble whom God exalts while at the same time bringing low those who exalt themselves.

It is this attitude of humility that Paul uses to describe Jesus to the Philippians. We are told not to do anything out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. They are the enemies of unity and humility. Many a family and church have been split apart because someone was selfish - wanting their own way or being conceited – thinking they had or should have a greater position in the church. Jesus gladly, willingly humbled himself to serve the will of His Father and went to the cross to die for us. Paul gladly, willingly humbled himself to serve the Lord so that many could be saved. Peter tells us that humility is a virtue that we are to clothe ourselves with.

Paul was willing to humble himself even in the face of false accusations. I think he could do so because as we learned from **20:22** it was the Holy Spirit who was leading him, it was the Holy Spirit to whom he had yielded. He was willing to submit to that will all the while knowing that it would lead to hardship and prison. Therefore he could write **“For me to live is Christ and to die is gain.” Philippians 1:21**

Paul had a talk that was honest.
Paul had a walk that was humble.

Do we?