

Introduction

I've titled this morning's message *False Assumptions, Real Problems* because throughout the passage we see people acting in accordance with what they wrongly believe to be true which causes their actions to also be wrong

I'm sure we're all familiar with the old saying about what it means to assume something

It may be cliché, but it so very often proves true which explains why it became a saying in the first place

Can any of us say that we've never gotten into trouble at some point because we made an assumption that later proved to be in error?

But we still continue to make assumptions all the time in fact it's normal to do so in all sorts of instances of daily life

I mean, we don't examine or test every chair we come across before sitting as we assume if it looks sturdy it must be

We assume when we fill in the blanks of what we know for sure with information from our past experiences and assuming can be a huge time saver – when we're right

But when we are wrong things can go very badly in a hurry

Mars Climate Orbiter

Just ask NASA

In October, 1999 NASA lost a satellite called the Mars Climate Orbiter when it burned up in the Martian atmosphere

It seems that the engineers that designed the thrust engines used the English system and used pounds for calculating force when designing the software that controlled the engines while the software that took in the data was designed to expect measurements in the metric system of newtons

Everyone continued to assume that everything was okay right up to the point the satellite entered the Martian atmosphere roughly 105 miles lower than it was designed to go and it was destroyed

That wrong assumption caused a mistake that cost NASA \$125-million

Relationships

Wrong assumptions can also be costly in our interpersonal relationships

How often do we assume we know all we need to know about a person based on how they look or a remark that we overheard completely out of context or some other snippet of information that we then build upon in our minds?

I would bet I'm not alone in having developed a mental picture of a radio personality based on nothing but their voice only to be surprised to find they looked nothing like what I imagined

The problem is that we tend not to even notice our assumptions because they seem logical and right to us

That's how prejudices form – when we think we know all we need to know based on some small piece of information

And we cause problems when we assume that others automatically know who we are and what we want when we haven't bothered to make ourselves or our desires known

And then we have the audacity to get upset and wonder why they assume wrongly

We rarely think that the other person has simply made a logical or reasonable error based on limited information and seek to supplement their information about us in a calm and rational way

Rather we wonder what on earth could possibly be wrong with them!

And we suffer loss as relationships fail to develop as they might have or they suffer strain and are even sometimes irreparably broken all because we and they made wrong assumptions

Spiritually

But the biggest damage of all can be done in the spiritual realm

Wrong assumptions can affect our witness as we determine who we should and shouldn't share the gospel with

Sometimes we wrongly assume that a person doesn't need to hear about the Savior because they appear to have their lives together

But more often we wrongly assume that someone may well be out of reach of salvation

We all have those who we consider and assume that they must surely need more than merely acknowledging their sins and accepting the payment of the shed blood of Jesus Christ as payment for those sins

That was all that I needed for sure but look at them – that can't be enough to save someone like that

Consider some of the villains of history, Adolf Hitler, Pol Pot, Al Capone, Jeffery Dahmer, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (the current head of ISIS who we know is guilty of all manner of crimes against God and man), and others

Wouldn't more be required for people like them?

I remember when it was reported that Jeffery Dahmer had accepted Christ while in prison

And how in the churches there was less rejoicing than there was skepticism and even a little scoffing at the very idea

And I think that was largely because there was a part of many believers who assumed that accepting Christ as they had wouldn't be sufficient for him – it was just too easy

False assumptions can also have a detrimental effect on our own spiritual growth as we wrongly assess ourselves

It's possible to grow up in a Christian home with a Christian pedigree or to live a moral, spiritual life and to wrongly conclude that because of one's heritage or lifestyle that God will welcome them into his heavenly home

Churches around the world have people who are faithfully attending and even serving to the utmost who have fooled themselves into believing that their zeal for God will save them – all because they have wrongly assessed themselves and their need

Then, as believers, we can wrongly elevate our spiritual condition to the point we think we've arrived and don't need to keep progressing in our Christian walk

Or we can undervalue where we are and begin to believe that spiritual growth isn't possible for us – that we're simply hopeless so we may as well give up

And we're going to see that those same false assumptions were being made in first century Jerusalem as we look at our passage this morning

Please join me in your Bibles in Acts 21 – our passage this morning is **Acts 21:37-22:30**

I. The Situation (21:37-40)

We need to back up just a bit as we begin and look at how Paul arrived at the situation in which he now finds himself

Paul was being falsely accused of encouraging Jews who lived among the Gentiles to disregard Jewish cultural norms and the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem were quite upset with Paul over this misunderstanding

This was the first false assumption as the Jewish believers assumed that they knew the facts without doing any investigation on their own and rather than simply asking Paul himself what he was teaching they got unjustly angry

But Paul was gracious and he agreed to sponsor four Jewish believers who were under a vow before God and we saw last week how he had gone to the temple to make good on his sponsorship when some unbelieving Jews from Asia saw him

And they accused him of having brought a Gentile into the inner court of the temple which was against the law and punishable by death

And here we have our second false assumption that was much like the first – as the Jews all flew off half-cocked without knowing for certain what was true

The people were incensed by this accusation – wrong as it was – and they swarmed in, drug Paul out of the temple, and began to beat him intending to beat him to death

The commander of the Roman garrison in Jerusalem became aware of the disturbance and rushed in with at least 200 soldiers and put an end to the disturbance by arresting Paul and hauling him off to the Roman barracks

The mob that had been temporarily shocked into inaction quickly regained their anger as they followed along with the soldiers who actually had to carry Paul up the stairs to the barracks to protect him from the mob who were crying out for Paul to be taken away and executed

Follow along as I read what happened next in **Acts 21:37-40**

***37**As Paul was about to be brought into the barracks, he said to the tribune, “May I say something to you?” And he said, “Do you know Greek? **38**Are you not the Egyptian, then, who recently stirred up a revolt and led the four thousand men of the Assassins out into the wilderness?” **39**Paul replied, “I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no obscure city. I beg you, permit me to speak to the people.” **40**And when he had given him permission, Paul, standing on the steps, motioned with his hand to the people. And when there was a great hush, he addressed them in the Hebrew language, saying:*

The Roman tribune or commander made a false assumption in deducing that Paul was a certain Egyptian terrorist who was on the loose – again we have another case of acting on incomplete information

See, a couple of years earlier an Egyptian had convinced a number of “dagger men” or “assassins” to follow him out to the area around the Mount of Olives with the promise that at his word the walls of Jerusalem would fall down flat and they would then rush in and overcome the Roman soldiers taking over Jerusalem

The Romans got wind of his plan and pre-emptively attacked the gang killing a goodly number of them and capturing others but the Egyptian leader slipped away

Of course, he was not very popular after that fiasco so the Roman tribune for some reason assumed that Paul must be this man who had returned only to face his just desserts

So when Paul spoke to him as an obviously educated man in the Greek language the tribune was taken by surprise

And when Paul made known his actual heritage as a Jew of the important city of Tarsus the tribune was so impressed that he allowed Paul to address the mob from his impromptu pulpit at the top of the stairs

Paul must have been a sight as he had just been soundly pummeled and yet his bearing earned him some amount of respect and latitude from the tribune

Still, notice how Paul was able to quiet the mob just by motioning to them with his hand –

I believe this speaks to Paul's obvious gift of natural leadership but also of God's supernatural control of the situation as the crowd hushed to hear what this man who they were more than ready to beat to death had to say

And we see Paul's speech to the mob in its entirety in **Acts 22:1-21**

Follow along as I read –

II. Paul's Speech to the Mob (22:1-21)

***1**"Brothers and fathers, hear the defense that I now make before you."*

***2**And when they heard that he was addressing them in the Hebrew language, they became even more quiet. And he said:*

***3**"I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day. **4**I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women, **5**as the high priest and the whole council of elders can bear me witness. From them I received letters to the brothers, and I journeyed toward Damascus to take those also who were there and bring them in bonds to Jerusalem to be punished.*

***6**"As I was on my way and drew near to Damascus, about noon a great light from heaven suddenly shone around me.*

***7**And I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?' **8**And I answered, 'Who are you, Lord?' And he said to me, 'I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting.' **9**Now those who were with me saw the light but did not understand the voice of the one who was speaking to me. **10**And I said, 'What shall I do, Lord?' And the Lord said to me, 'Rise, and go into Damascus, and there you will be told all that is appointed for you to do.' **11**And since I could not see because of the brightness of that light, I was led by the hand by those who were with me, and came into Damascus.*

***12**"And one Ananias, a devout man according to the law, well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there, **13**came to me, and standing by me said to me, 'Brother Saul, receive your sight.' And at that very hour I received my sight and saw him. **14**And he said, 'The God of our fathers appointed you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear a voice from his mouth; **15**for you will be a witness for him to everyone of what you have seen and heard. **16**And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name.'*

***17**"When I had returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, I fell into a trance **18**and saw him saying to me, 'Make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about me.' **19**And I said, 'Lord, they themselves know that in one synagogue after another I imprisoned and beat those who believed in you. **20**And when the blood of Stephen your witness was being shed, I myself was standing by and approving and watching over the garments of those who killed him.' **21**And he said to me, 'Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles.'"*

How many of you would be willing to share the gospel with a mob who was clamoring to beat you to death?

What an amazing testimony to Paul's faithfulness to his mission to be a witness of Jesus Christ!

We will notice many things that Paul did well as he skillfully addressed the Jewish mob with tact and diplomacy

But we will also see that he made a wrong assumption in addressing them at all

The first thing Paul did right was he switched from speaking in Greek to the tribune to speaking in Hebrew or, more likely, Aramaic to the crowd

Speaking to them in their native language was a master stroke of diplomacy that caused them to become even quieter and more focused on what he had to say

Simply by using Aramaic for his address he identified himself as one of them and won himself a hearing that he might otherwise have not enjoyed

And Paul didn't assume that everyone in the crowd knew who he was or even anything at all about him

He had been gone from Jerusalem for 20 years by this time and had only visited sporadically and for a short amount of time and his visits during those 20 years had been only to a select few

Long gone were the days when he was well-known as the up and coming golden boy of the Pharisees

A whole generation of Jerusalemites who didn't know and likely couldn't care less about who Paul was had been born and grown to adulthood during those years

A. Paul's Upbringing (22:3-5)

So Paul started at the beginning and told them first about his upbringing and education in verses 3-5

Paul told them that he was a Jew of the dispersion who was born in Tarsus of Cilicia but that he was actually raised in Jerusalem

He was establishing common ground – Paul was one of them even though he had been gone for a long time

He told them how he had received his education at the feet of Gamaliel who was one of the most renowned rabbis of the day

We first met Gamaliel in Acts 5 when he counseled taking a wait and see approach to Christianity and **Acts 5:34** tells us that he was “a teacher of the law held in honor by all the people”

And he was Paul's teacher who taught him according to the “strict manner of the law of our fathers” Paul was raised to be an Orthodox Jew

Paul tells the people that he was “zealous for God” he was an enthusiast who was all in when it came to serving and defending what he believed to be right in God's eyes

To prove his zeal Paul reminded the mob that of his persecution of what he referred to as “this Way” meaning Christianity

We remember how Paul stood as an eager, encouraging witness to the stoning of Stephen the first martyr and how he had gotten permission to go beyond Jerusalem and Judea to Syria as he travelled to Damascus with the intention of hunting down Jewish converts to Christianity and bringing them back in chains to face judgment, punishment, and perhaps even death

The mob wrongly assumed that Paul was no one of consequence; a troublemaker from out of town who was encouraging apostasy in faraway places – they had no idea who Paul truly was

And again Paul showed them the common ground of their experience as he compared his zeal to the zeal that they were demonstrating on that very day thinking that they were right in doing so

In a sense Paul was letting them know that he understood very well why they had attacked him and why they wanted to kill him because he had once been just like them

Like them Paul had wrongly assumed that zeal for God was always equivalent with righteous action

Paul set out to destroy Christianity thinking he was doing God's work and this mob was seeking to destroy God's apostle for the very same reason

And prior to both of these the nation of Israel was driven by the same zeal to kill the Messiah

So we can't assume that zealousness means rightness – we can be most sincere and enthusiastic and still be wrong

Because in assuming that they were serving God in their zeal all of them were actually working against God

B. Paul's Damascus Road Experience (22:6-11)

Having established the common ground of heritage Paul turned next to his experience on the road to Damascus in verses 6-11

We've seen this account before in Acts 9 but that was related by Luke in the third person while this is related in Paul's own words in the first person

We will see another first person account later in Acts 26 when Paul testifies before Agrippa

The only real difference between the accounts concerns the details emphasized in each as they are told to different audiences for different purposes – otherwise they are identical

In this telling before the mob the fact that Paul emphasizes is that **his salvation and conversion to Christianity was a matter of God's grace and not according to Paul's merit or initiative** – Paul was not a “seeker” he was a predator

And Paul found himself to be the unwitting subject of a supernatural event by which the risen Jesus showed up in all his exalted glory and temporarily blinded Paul with his brightness

Just think how bright that light had to be to overrule the noonday sun!

And Paul invites corroboration as he shares that his travelling companions heard the sound of Jesus' voice but couldn't understand what was said

It was here that Paul met the resurrected Jesus and recognized that he had been persecuting the Messiah by persecuting his followers

C. Paul's Visit by Ananias (22:12-16)

After being led by the hand the rest of the way into Damascus Paul was visited by Ananias who he describes as a “devout man according to the law well spoken of by all the Jews who lived [in Damascus]”

Ananias was the instrument God used to restore Paul's sight and to tell him what God was doing and what God expected from Paul

And Paul tells how Ananias encouraged him to be baptized thereby testifying openly to his salvation which he had received

It's interesting that Paul describes Ananias only as a Jew and doesn't mention that he was also a Christian

But Paul did that for a reason

In showing himself and Ananias to be exemplary Jews he showed that they weren't apostates who were going against God or denying their Jewish heritage in accepting Jesus as Messiah

God had shown them the truth and they simply did as any good Jew should be expected to do in accepting it

D. Paul's Visit to Jerusalem (22:17-21)

Then in verses 17-21 Paul described his first visit back to Jerusalem after his conversion

He shows that he was still acting like a devout Jew would be expected to act as he tells that he was in the temple praying – no doubt at one of the prescribed times of prayer

And he relates that while he was praying he fell into a trance and saw Jesus telling him to hurry out of Jerusalem because the Jews there would never accept his testimony

This vision is very reminiscent of Peter's vision on the roof of the home of Simon the Tanner and Paul's response reminds us of a response that would have typically come from Peter – Paul argued with Jesus

In verses 19-20 Paul disputes and says that surely since the Jews know his history and will surely see the dramatic change that has come over him that they will be moved to accept what he has to tell them

But Jesus answered his protest with the simple command, “Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles”

Earlier, I said that Paul made an errant assumption concerning speaking the mob at all and this is it

Clearly he still thought his testimony would break through the hostility and win the day

And I would have to say that the **possibility**, the **propensity**, the **probability**, or even the **promise** of hardened hearts shouldn't stop us from sharing the gospel whenever we have the chance

Paul told the Ephesian elders earlier that his hands were clean because he had done all he could to teach them God's Word and here he can say that his hands are clean because he did everything possible to share the gospel even with the hostile mob that only wanted him dead

The mob wrongly assumed that Paul was a renegade who had gone to the Gentiles on his own, that he was preaching the gospel message that Jesus is the Messiah and extending salvation to the Gentiles on his own

And Paul made it clear that it was God who sent him to take the gospel to the Gentiles – this wasn't something that Paul dreamed up on his own – in going he was only being obedient

E. The Mob's Reaction (22:22-23)

Paul enjoyed the rapt attention of the now calm mob right up until he said the word "Gentiles" and then they lost it

We see their reaction in **verses 22-23** as they once again begin to shout "Away with such a fellow from the earth! For he should not be allowed to live."

They tore off their coats perhaps in preparation for stoning Paul as we saw when Stephen was stoned and they threw dust in the air perhaps out of frustration at not being able to actually get ahold of Paul to kill him

So, what enraged them?

It wasn't the idea of Gentiles being converted – Gentile proselytes were a regular thing in Judaism

It wasn't Paul's testimony about Jesus – they had listened quietly as Paul talked about his encounter with Jesus

It was the fact that Paul dared to suggest that Gentiles and Jews were on equal footing when it came to becoming a Christian – the idea that everyone has to come to Jesus in the same way was intolerable

They were like the laborers in the parable of Jesus about the workers in the vineyard who believed that a person getting a day's pay for an hour's work was somehow unfair – that the vineyard owner couldn't be generous to some without somehow damaging another

And it was like the older brother to the prodigal son who pouted and fumed because his brother was treated kindly in spite of his wayward ways and that he should have been given a higher honor because of his loyalty

The Jews were God's chosen people and they believed that if a Gentile wanted to become a Christian he should have to become a Jew first – after all, anything else would be unfair

They wrongly assumed that the road to reconciliation with God ran directly through Judaism

We don't like to admit it but we often fall into that same mode of thinking even if unwittingly

If we aren't careful we can develop the tendency to think that all people who are truly saved will be just like us

Everyone who comes to God must come through Jesus Christ but can we really say that all people must come to Jesus Christ in the same way and take on the trappings that we think are befitting a true Christian?

That every believer will dress alike, carry the same Bible version, enjoy the same things, and so forth

And we aren't immune from setting up our own caste system and of thinking that some are more worthy of salvation than others and that some might just have to do a bit more than others in order to be saved

Honestly, when I mentioned some of history's villains didn't you kind of go, "Oh my" at the thought of the possibility of meeting some of those people in heaven? I mean, God wouldn't actually save them, would he?

III. Paul and the Tribune (22:24-30)

Our passage ends with Paul's encounter with the tribune of the Roman guard in verses 24-30

And in these verses we see that the Roman commander makes a false assumption of his own that causes him to violate Roman law and that he is only spared a further violation by Paul's revelation of his Roman citizenship

24the tribune ordered him to be brought into the barracks, saying that he should be examined by flogging, to find out why they were shouting against him like this. **25**But when they had stretched him out for the whips, Paul said to the centurion who was standing by, "Is it lawful for you to flog a man who is a Roman citizen and uncondemned?" **26**When the centurion heard this, he went to the tribune and said to him, "What are you about to do? For this man is a Roman citizen." **27**So the tribune came and said to him, "Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?" And he said, "Yes." **28**The tribune answered, "I bought this citizenship for a large sum." Paul said, "But I am a citizen by birth." **29**So those who were about to examine him withdrew from him immediately, and the tribune also was afraid, for he realized that Paul was a Roman citizen and that he had bound him.

30But on the next day, desiring to know the real reason why he was being accused by the Jews, he unbound him and commanded the chief priests and all the council to meet, and he brought Paul down and set him before them.

I always have to shake my head in wonder at the idea of examining someone by flogging

It's a barbarous idea and it goes against of our idea of justice but it was common practice for Rome in the 1st century

This "flogging" would have been done with a scourge or a flagellum which was made up of a number of short leather thongs tipped by metal or bone that were attached to a long wooden handle

The person who was being flogged was bound to a pole or column with leather thongs leaving their bare back exposed and preventing them from moving or even falling down

Typically the beating wouldn't stop until the accused confessed to his crimes and scourging led to many deaths

I don't know why Paul waited as long as he did to announce his citizenship – I think I would have led off with it

But after he was bound he asked the centurion whether it was legal to flog a man who is a Roman citizen

Upon hearing this question the centurion alerted the tribune who came and personally inquired as to Paul's claim

When Paul confirmed his claim of Roman citizenship to the tribune he responds with an interesting statement that he had purchased his own citizenship for a "large sum" implying that citizenship must be going for bargain basement prices these days if someone like Paul could afford it

Of course Roman citizenship couldn't be bought outright but was given in exchange for bribes from time to time by the unscrupulous

Citizenship could also be awarded to someone in recognition of some good deed done for a Roman official and apparently either Paul's father or grandfather had received such a bestowal because Paul announces that he was born a citizen

Paul was a rarity as it was highly unusual to find a man who was a prestigious, educated Jew and also a Roman citizen so the tribune assumed that Paul was just a Jew and even a Jew from a prestigious city like Tarsus could be scourged

But Paul was a Roman citizen by birth and therefore by law could not be punished without a trial

In fact, Roman law had already been broken simply by binding Paul to the post to be flogged and unlike the mob outside the tribune recognized his error and was frightened

And he set out to take steps to discover what exactly was going on – we will look at Paul's meeting before the council next week in Acts 23

Conclusion

Assumptions are a normal part of daily life as we rarely have all the information we need when we need it and assuming can save us copious amounts of time

But assuming can get us into trouble when our assumptions are wrong

This morning we've seen how wrong assumptions can have serious negative consequences

None more serious than what wrong assumptions can do to us spiritually

Our witness can be negatively affected as we make assumptions about other people and their worthiness or their ability to be saved and we decide whether or not they are worth our time and energy

Our own salvation can be impacted when we wrongly assume that we are okay with God just the way we are and we really haven't done anything deserving of condemnation so we don't need a Savior

And **our sanctification** or our spiritual growth can be compromised when we wrongly see ourselves as being better than we truly are and become complacent – or conversely when we see ourselves as beyond hope and give up

The ground is level at the foot of the cross and everyone must be reconciled to God in the same way and no one has fully achieved all that God requires of us as his children

What wrong assumptions are you making today?

Let's pray