

## "UNDERSTANDING MISUNDERSTANDING"

(Acts 21:18-39)

(Chuck Swindoll)

No one likes to be misunderstood. It's lonely. It's frustrating. It leaves us feeling helpless, and then hopeless, and if we're not careful, resentful toward others. Bitterness can easily set in. As I observe Paul's experience with misunderstanding, three truths emerge.

First, *the reality of misunderstanding is inescapable*. If you want to have any kind of meaningful impact or cultivate significant relationships, you will be misunderstood. If you want to drift through this life, do what everyone else does, go along with the majority opinion, and avoid saying or doing anything of significance, then you'll never have to worry about being misunderstood. If, however, you expect to be different from the run-of-the-mill crowd, if you hope to achieve something that hasn't been attempted, if you try to improve upon the status quo, I repeat: You will be misunderstood. Count on it.

Noah? That whole boat scene must have been unbelievable. Moses? He expected his people to understand God's purpose for his life, but they didn't. Joseph? He maintained the highest level of integrity and purity, yet Potiphar sided with his wife, who accused Joseph of attempted rape. In spite of his honesty, he landed in prison. And the Old Testament prophets? Ignored, marginalized, accused of disloyalty, mercilessly criticized, openly hated, often killed as enemies of Israel. John the Baptizer? Hailed as a prophet, ignored as a madman. The Protestant Reformers? Treated like heretics, cursed like devils, and hunted like animals. Anyone who has ever done anything worthwhile has been misunderstood.

Second, *the reasons for misunderstanding are unpredictable*. Misunderstandings occur for many reasons, so we cannot anticipate how or when they will occur. Furthermore, most of them lie beyond our control. Snap judgments, pride, fear, prejudice, slander, pettiness, ambition, vainglory—the causes are too numerous and diverse to count. And when misunderstandings occur, we can do very little to resolve them. Most could be settled in a matter of minutes with a simple conversation, but only if the other party wants to listen. You can be responsible only to communicate clearly; the response of others isn't up to you.

Recognizing your helplessness in these situations can be incredibly freeing, giving you permission to step away and leave the matter in God's hands.

Third, *the reaction to misunderstanding is yours to decide*. Typically, people respond to misunderstandings in three ways. Some work themselves into a frenzy trying to get the other party to hear and acknowledge the truth. They scream, they plead, they repeat themselves endlessly, they live in anguished desperation to be heard. Others turn inward, sulkily determined to play the martyr and allow the acid of bitterness to eat away at them. I don't recommend either of these two responses. The best response to misunderstanding is to extend an invitation to discuss the matter, and then get on with life. Accept your helplessness, pray for strength to go on, allow God to handle the difficulty, expend no more energy to resolve it, and then devote yourself to fulfilling your purpose in life. These are true marks of greatness.

