

4. Paul's defense before the Sanhedrin – which was the third and climactic one he presented in Jerusalem – failed to win the day. When he declared that he was on trial for the fact of the resurrection of the dead and the hope it engenders, the assembly erupted into confusion and chaos. Apparently, the uproar pertained more to the question of resurrection itself than to Paul's claims respecting it and his relation to it. As is so commonly the case in religious communities (even those that bear the name of Christ), jealous ownership of sectarian doctrinal constructs – not the gospel itself and its implications – provoked the furious passion of the members of the Sanhedrin.

The dissension became so intense that the Roman commander was afraid Paul would be torn to pieces if he didn't intervene and forcibly remove him from the proceedings. And so he ordered his soldiers to seize him and return him to the Roman barracks. Paul's defense in Jerusalem had come to an end; there was nothing left to say. The "city of the great God" had rejected the Lord's ambassador even as it had rejected Him. Jerusalem (as epitomizing the Israelite nation) had filled up the cup of its guilt and there remained nothing more for it than its impending desolation at the hands of the Romans (cf. Matthew 23:29-39 with Luke 13:34-35 and 19:28-44; also 23:13-31).

The time had come for Paul to "shake out his garments" against Jerusalem, and if he had any doubts of this, Jesus' appearance that night dispelled them. For many months Paul had purposed to go to Rome and minister the gospel to the saints there; Jesus' appearance confirmed to him that his heart's longing was the fruit of the Spirit's leading (ref. again 19:21; cf. Romans 1:8-15, 15:20-25). On the word of the enthroned Lord who has all authority in heaven and earth, Paul would indeed testify of Him in Rome (23:11).

The balance of the chapter unfolds yet another plot against Paul's life. It provides the explanation for how Paul found himself in Caesarea set for his next defense before Felix. In accordance with Jesus' commission (9:15), Paul had witnessed to Him among the rulers of Israel, and now he would do so before their Gentile counterparts, culminating with an appearance before Caesar himself – the human ruler who most thoroughly challenged King Jesus by claiming his own divinity as well as the status of "king of kings and lord of lords." Paul would testify to the supreme lordship of the true King in the very place that, at that point in history, most epitomized the hubristic human claim to autonomous authority and power over all the earth – even over heaven itself.

The way in which Luke constructed his narrative shows that he intended Jesus' appearance and pronouncement to Paul to supply the interpretive backdrop for the episode that followed: The Lord had declared that His servant would go to Rome on His behalf; now, only hours later, a fearful conspiracy was being formed against Paul's life. Several things about this situation and its dynamics are important to note:

- a. The first is the sharp contrast provided by the conflict of two apparently invincible "wills." Jesus was resolved that Paul had further work of testimony ahead of him; the band of Jewish conspirators was equally resolved that Paul's life had reached its end. Jerusalem's sons had sought his life before (9:26-29), but this time they pledged their own lives against his (23:12).

- b. The second consideration is the Lord's amazing providence in foiling the conspiracy. The assassins needed to gain access to Paul in order to carry out their plot, and a petition to the Roman commander for a further inquisition by the Council seemed the perfect device for securing that access. Soldier escorts would doubtless lead Paul from the barracks, but that handful of men would be no match for a large band of assailants lying in wait and having the advantage of surprise.

The conspiracy was well conceived and the conspirators had bound their own lives to the mission's success: To all appearances, Paul was a dead man; nothing stood between him and his impending murder. But somehow the Lord saw to it that Paul's nephew learned of the plot. Luke isn't clear whether he overheard the conspirators talking with the chief priests and elders or he was informed by someone else. In the end it doesn't matter; what is important is that Paul's work was not yet finished and Jesus was not going to let their scheme succeed.

- 1) Divine providential intervention made Paul's nephew aware of the conspiracy to murder him, and the Lord also saw to it that he was allowed into the Roman headquarters and given permission to speak with Paul.
- 2) When Paul learned of the plot, he immediately called for one of the centurions on duty and asked him to take his nephew to see the commander. A Roman officer had no obligation to yield to the request of a Jewish prisoner; in fact, one would have expected him to ignore it. But once again divine will and power prevailed and the centurion brought the young man to his commander.
- 3) And if it was remarkable that a centurion would bow to Paul's request, it was all the more amazing that the commander of the entire Roman force in Jerusalem would agree to give audience to a Jewish adolescent and then actually believe his astonishing tale. But this is precisely what happened.
- 4) Lastly, divine providence led the commander to intervene on Paul's behalf. Perhaps it was because he was convinced that Paul was innocent of any crime deserving death (ref. 23:28-29); perhaps it was because he was a Roman citizen. Whatever the commander's conscious reasons for protecting this Jew, he was ultimately acting as the Lord's instrument.

Having sent away Paul's nephew with a warning to say nothing about their meeting, the commander ordered that Paul be removed from Jerusalem and taken to Caesarea on the coast (23:22-24). The fact that he moved him under the cloak of darkness and with the protection of more than four hundred men – heavily armed legionaries, mounted cavalry and light-armed supplementary forces – shows just how seriously he took the threat against Paul. That night the contingent departed and led Paul as far as the city of Antipatris located on the Jerusalem-Caesarea road just inland from Caesarea. From there the foot soldiers returned to Jerusalem, leaving the horsemen to deliver Paul safely to Felix.

- c. A third consideration is Paul's rationale in taking action on his own behalf and the implications of it. This concern is easily overlooked in reading the passage, but it is perhaps the most important thing to be taken from it. Specifically, Jesus had just informed Paul that he was going to witness to Him in Rome; having that directive from the sovereign Lord, there was no possibility that the Jews' plot against him could succeed. Why, then, did Paul feel the need to do anything at all when he learned of it? Why did he not simply rest in Jesus' words, unafraid and confident that He would deliver him?

Viewed from one perspective, it can be argued that Paul's self-intervention amounted to a flagrant act of unbelief. For Paul wasn't simply hopeful that he would leave Jerusalem alive; Jesus had directly communicated that fact to him. The Lord had pledged his safe-keeping and Paul was obligated to trust Him. By taking matters into his own hands, wasn't Paul showing himself to be just as faithless as his countrymen who, throughout their history, had sought protection and deliverance from threats through human devices and agents (cf. 2 Kings 16:1-7; Isaiah 30:1-5, 31:1 with 36:1-6 and 41:1-13; also Jeremiah 41-42; etc.)?

Luke is clear that Paul wasted no time taking action to prevent his murder once he learned of the plot against him, though only hours earlier Jesus had assured him that he would indeed go to Rome. These facts are beyond dispute, but they need not be interpreted as indicating Paul's unbelief. Quite the opposite, Paul's response was actually the demonstration of his steadfast faith. This becomes clear when one understands the difference between *faith* and *presumption*.

- Stated most simply, **faith** is the faculty of perception and conviction that is uniquely the property of those who have been born of the Spirit. Faith is a divine endowment (cf. John 3:1-3 with Ephesians 2:8; Philippians 1:29).
- **Presumption**, on the other hand, is the counterfeit counterpart to faith and is the property of the natural mind. Presumption masquerades as faith – it is confused with and substitutes for faith – in those who don't think and judge with the mind of Christ (whether because they lack Christ's life and mind altogether or because they are failing to walk in His Spirit).

The obvious implication is that a life of faith, while *possible* for Christians, isn't *automatic* or *guaranteed* to them; precisely because they are capable of grieving and quenching the Spirit – of giving themselves to the leading of the “old man” – Christians are able to mistake presumption for faith. ***As a result, they can live lives of unbelief even while fully convinced that they're people of faith.***

Faith and presumption are mutually exclusive. This is true first because they are the two distinct ways in which human beings can perceive and interact with the relationship between themselves and deity. But it is also true in that the one reflects the *mind of the flesh* (the old man) and the other the *mind of the Spirit* (the new man) (cf. Romans 8:1-14 with Ephesians 4:17-24; Colossians 3:1-11).

This mutual exclusivity between faith and presumption itself highlights a couple of important implications:

- First, it shows that Christians and non-Christians inhabit completely distinct realms of spiritual existence. The “natural man” retains his spirituality as divine image-bearer, but he is consigned to relate to deity through the barrier of his estrangement; the natural man may have spiritual/religious convictions, but he has no faith. The Christian – the “man of the Spirit” – is alone the possessor of faith, for he is able to relate to God in truth and intimacy because his estrangement has been banished and he enjoys union with the triune God in the Spirit.
- Only those born of the Spirit can relate to God in faith, but, as noted, a life of faith isn’t inevitable for them. Christians are capable of mirroring their estranged counterparts by substituting presumption for faith, but with a profound difference: They have a far greater culpability in their unbelief.

All of these considerations show how critically important it is for Christians to recognize the difference between faith and presumption. Only then will they be able to effectively detect the counterfeit and apply themselves to living lives of faith – lives characterized by the authentic faithfulness of sons. There are two fundamental bases for understanding the distinction:

- 1) The first has already been noted, namely that faith and presumption speak to the two possible, mutually exclusive ways in which human beings can relate to and interact with deity. This is the case irrespective of whether the deity of concern is the true God or a humanly conceived pseudo-deity.
- 2) Secondly, this dynamic of human-divine relatedness works from the vantage point of the human being. That is, faith and presumption pertain to how *people* relate to deity, not how deity relates to them. This, in turn, leads to two further considerations:
 - First, because all human beings live in their own minds, it is their own personal perceptions, thoughts and convictions that determine whether their relation to deity is one of faith or presumption. *External factors are irrelevant to the issue of living by faith; it is decided entirely by what goes on in the person’s head.*
 - But precisely because the faith/presumption distinction hinges on the mind of the individual person, the fact that he happens to be concerned with the God of the Scripture rather than some imagined deity makes absolutely no difference in itself. *If simply giving one’s attention to the right God were the determining factor in the question of faith versus presumption, the whole matter would be a non-issue for Christians.*

These considerations explain why faith defines the “new man” (the mind set on the Spirit) and presumption the “old man” (the mind set on the flesh). They also explain why Christians are able to confuse presumption with faith and why they so easily fall prey to it: They have become partakers in the new creation in Christ, but they must apply themselves to live into it; they must put on the new self.

Faith and presumption reflect the two fundamental frames of reference and orientation that are possible for the human mind. The one characterizes human beings as they exist in their estranged condition; the other as they’re reconciled to God and joined to Him in Christ. In their natural state, all people have themselves as their datum and frame of reference. Humans are self-aware beings, and so experience and interact with all things through the “processor” that is their own mind. But the problem for fallen man is that he is *isolated* within his mind: Cut off from God’s life and mind, he exists as the center of his own universe and is constrained to encounter everything in terms of himself as ultimate.

If faith and presumption speak to how a person relates to deity – in this instance, to the true God who has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ, the natural man has no choice but to relate to God through a self that exists as its own ultimate “truth.” (In contrast, the man of faith relates to God and all things with the mind of Christ, who Himself is the truth.) Incapable of moving beyond himself, the man devoid of the Spirit cannot yield himself to God; he has no choice but to *presume* upon Him, even if he calls that relationship “faith.” The same trap is laid for those Christians who are not careful to walk in the Spirit. A few examples are helpful:

- 1) The first is the way believers so readily seek to script God into their own “wish dream.” A most obvious and flagrant case is the “name-it-and-claim-it” doctrine of so-called “prosperity theology.” Here faith is reduced to a magical power: a spiritual force by which God can be moved to provide sought after “blessings” (Matthew 17:14ff, 21:21-22; John 15:7).

More often Christians devise spiritual, God-ward visions and aspirations for their “wish dreams.” This is a more sinister deception because “wish dreams” of this type are readily attributed to God’s will and leading. The particulars are more “godly,” but the perversion of faith is the same: Faith still means “believing God” for what the person himself has conceived.

- 2) An even more insidious variation of this involves “claiming” that which God has *actually* promised. This is the most disastrous because “faith” is now directed toward God’s explicit word. Rather than yielded trust in the God behind the promise, faith becomes attachment to the thing promised. In this way, *faith in God* is perverted into *testing God*. Corresponding to this is the notion that we can “force God’s hand” by creating a certain situation or circumstance. Where faith means believing God for His promises, the life of faith readily degenerates into intentional activity calculated to secure those promises (1 Samuel 24:1-12; Romans 5:19-6:1).

It is significant that, in tempting Jesus at the point of His true humanity as the Last Adam, Satan chose to employ this particular way of confusing faith and presumption (cf. Matthew 4:5-7 with Psalm 91 as portraying the man of faith and the blessing he enjoys). What Satan held out to Jesus as a valid, even honorable expression of His faith in the God who had pledged His care and protection was actually a temptation to presumption: He was tempting Jesus to *unbelief* by having Him test His Father's trustworthiness with respect to His declared commitment to His faithful ones.

But the serpent's deception failed; the faithful Son – the True Man – recognized the difference between faith and presumption and refused to take the bait. He knew “whom He had believed” and didn't need to prove out His Father's integrity and loving devotion. The Father would provide His care and provision according to His faithful lovingkindness, and the Son could rest in that “wise bestowment” (so Matthew 4:1-4, 10-11).

- 3) A corresponding example of presumption masquerading as faith is Christians relating to God as if they know how He intends to accomplish His will and work in their lives. This is “claiming” the *how* as well as the *what*. In practice, this amounts to *dictating* to God, evident in the person's resentment or sense of divine displeasure or abandonment when things don't go as he expected. God does at times impart a vision to His children, but this doesn't mean He owns whatever path or process they imagine for its realization. God's means to His ordained end rarely correspond with human judgment and expectations. Faith is not sight.
- 4) A final example is the tendency of Christians to embrace divine promise as absolving them of personal responsibility or the need for appropriate action. This is the error that lies behind the conclusion that Paul was guilty of unbelief by acting upon his nephew's warning. *If scripting God into our wish dream and presuming to know how He will accomplish His purposes constitutes taking matters into our own hands, so does unresponsiveness.* God accomplishes His will, but virtually always through the natural dynamics of life. “Let go and let God” is divine and precious truth when it describes the Christian's faith – when it speaks to the unilateral nature of his relationship with his Father and to his quiet, trusting dependence upon Him and His loving purpose and perfect provision; it is heresy when it calls for an attitude of indifference, indolence or inactivity.

Paul knew what Christ had promised him and he had no doubt that he would live to see Rome. But it was precisely that confidence that kept him from putting Jesus' word to the test by sitting back and seeing if He would provide a miraculous deliverance. Like the Lord whose life and mind he possessed, Paul understood that faith meets every situation and circumstance as it demands, yet always with the settled confidence that He who promised is faithful. Free of doubt or worry, the birds go about their business, meeting the obligations of the day (Matthew 6:26); could Paul, the image-son, do any less?