

Acts 28
Paul in Rome

Introduction

In this final chapter of Acts, Paul reaches Rome after the shipwreck off Malta. While in Malta he survived an attack by a viper and healed Publius's father (Publius was the chief man on the island) before embarking a ship with the sign of Caster and Pollux (two Roman gods, patrons of navigation and sea-farers). The ship brought him via Sicily, finally to mainland Italy at Rhegium. Then they sailed another 200 miles to Puteoli, on the Gulf of Naples. Paul spent a week there with Christian brothers and sisters, and then continued the final lap of the journey to Rome via road.

The Appian Way is the oldest, straightest and best made of all Roman roads. The Christians in Rome heard that Paul was soon to arrive, and some travelled 30 miles to greet him at Three Taverns, others went a further 10 miles to meet him at Appius Forum. When Paul saw them he thanked God, and took courage at the sight of them. It must have been an emotional experience, actually seeing for the first time the Christians he had written to in his letter to the Romans.

On arriving in Rome, Paul was put in his own hired lodgings under guard of a Roman soldier to whom he was chained by the right wrist. At last he was there. He had dreamt, prayed and looked forward to this arrival. Rome was the largest and most magnificent of the ancient cities, the capital of the mighty Roman Empire which spanned the civilized world. It had a wonderful network of roads, important ports, amazing postal service, a great army which ensured peace and safety in travel. Rome itself was visited by people from far and wide, there to see the famous buildings, chariot races, circuses, temples, theatres, baths and aqueducts.

Paul had longed to see it for years. It must have been thrilling, the experience of a lifetime. One writer had described it as a "filthy sewer" because of its decadence, but it needed the Gospel all the more urgently. In his letter to the Romans Paul had expressed how he longed to see the city and the church there, to strengthen it. Paul witnessed to the church from his own house for two years. After that time we assume he was executed, but we are not told. Could he have been released and done another tour of the east? Why did Luke finish before telling us the end of this great career? Was Luke interrupted, did he plan a third volume, did he die? Or was it his intention to leave us with this picture of Paul triumphantly and boldly in Rome with the kingdom of God and the Gospel of Jesus Christ as his theme, under the very eye of the Emperor?

The love shown by the brethren

There were several interesting notices of Paul being contacted by Christians in Italy. Paul saw them and thanked God, and was encouraged because of these Christian friends. Then he met Christians of course in Rome itself. Who were they, and how long had they been there? There was certainly a well established church in Rome when Paul wrote his epistle to the Romans in 57AD. Their faith and loyalty was

renowned throughout all the churches. It had not been founded by Peter; he was not the bishop there for 25 years. N.B. Peter is not mentioned in Romans 16 in the greetings. It was probably founded by people who had been in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:10). Whoever they were, they were warm-hearted people, who travelled a long way, probably on foot, to meet Paul and extend their welcome to him.

Paul had been under great strain. The voyage had been long and tedious, and he was constantly aware of his forthcoming trial. But when he grasped their hands and looked into their faces, he thanked God and was encouraged. How often the most heroic people have needs and are helped by the sympathy and support of the humble. C.f. Luther on his way to the Diet of Worms, braced for an ordeal. Christians clapped him on the back as he passed by, and spoke hearty words of cheer. Often speakers knowing they are going into the lions den, speaking for the Lord where they know there will be few supporters, are encouraged knowing that back home there are people from their congregation praying for them.

Paul could leave the future in God's hands. His mind was in perfect peace because it was stayed on God. What a precious thing Christian fellowship is. The early church **devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship** (Acts 2:42). Paul thanked the Philippians for **their partnership in the gospel from the first day until now** (Philippians 1:5). They showed love in practical ways, being hospitable, comforting one another, and bearing one another's burdens. This love is one of the marks of the new birth. **We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers** (1 John 3:14).

Churches must be more than preaching centres – they must be families. You can be well fed at a very sound church, but if there is no sense of love and fellowship, you will feel like an intruder, spend a lot of time on your own, no one will care for you when you are sick or anxious, afraid or lonely. Paul the prisoner was glad he was part of a caring family, and he was encouraged.

The division caused by the Gospel

Since his arrival at Rome, the chief Jews had met with Paul (there were at least seven synagogues in Rome at this time), and he had explained the Gospel to them. Many of them came to his lodgings and heard him tell of the Kingdom of God, and show them that Jesus was the Messiah. Some were convinced, but others did not believe. Isaiah foretold this rejection.

Paul was faithful to his commission – telling the Jews first, and then the Gentiles. The Gospel always sifts. Some accept, and some reject. The fire which melts also hardens clay. Light, which is joy to people with good sight, is agony to diseased eyes. The word, which is the savour of life to some, is the savour of death to others. To some, Christ is the foundation on which they build. To others, he is a stumbling block on which they are broken.

The Word never leaves us the same. When we reject it, hardening follows unbelief. First we will not, and then we cannot. Conscience is seared. "Gospel-hardened" people sit in the congregation hearing the Word of God for years. Some of the saddest

words in the Bible: **He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him** (John 1:11).

The service rendered by the prisoner

So Luke ends his book saying that Paul was in his own rented house, welcoming all who would come to see him. **Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ** (Acts 28:31). God had promised that Paul would get to Rome and witness there, and he did. Using Jewish fury, Roman government, imprisonment and shipwreck, God fulfilled His promise. **Stormy winds that do his bidding** (Psalm 148:8). **What has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly** (Philippians 1:12-14).

Paul taught and witnessed to all his visitors. He wrote some very important letters – Philemon, Colossians, Ephesians and Philippians. He was at peace, and knew real contentment. These letters stress the supreme and unrivalled Lordship of Christ. The Person and Work of Christ are given cosmic proportions. Christ was God’s agent in creation and in Redemption. Everything is under His feet. His supremacy is total.

Paul illustrated how every man’s life is a plan of God. In that plan was adversity and prosperity, cloud and sunshine. Apparent hindrances actually helped to forward God’s plans, just like Joseph’s brothers treatment of him: **You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives** (Genesis 50:20). Similarly, Christ’s crucifixion saw Jesus handed over to the Jews – but it was **by God's set purpose and foreknowledge** (Acts 2:23).

There are few more hopeless and miserable places than prisons. But some gems have come forth from them, e.g. Luther’s translation of the Bible into German while imprisoned in Wartburg Castle; John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* while in Bedford Jail; Samuel Rutherford’s letters from Aberdeen Prison; Madam Guyon who, imprisoned in the Bastille, penned:

*“A little bird am I,
Shut in from fields or air.
And all day long I sit and sing
To Him who placed me there.”*

Beware of grumbling over your lot. Your disappointments can be His appointments. **We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose** (Romans 8:28). There are things to be learnt about God and things to be done for God that can only be done in times of adversity. All that happens to us can serve to advance the Gospel. As we look back over life with its light and shade, prosperity and adversity, ups and downs, what a wonderful thing it will be to be able to say: **I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith** (2 Timothy 4:7).