

Rome at Last!

Acts 28:1 - 28

So we come to the close of the Acts of the Holy Spirit recorded by Luke: in 28 years (AD34-62), one generation of activity, Churches have been planted from Jerusalem to Rome, and maybe even Spain (Romans 15:28). Fools for Christ have conquered the world in ever increasing circles (Jerusalem, Judea and all Samaria, the ends of the Earth 1:8). We see Paul post-trials having sailed, got caught in a Storm, Shipwrecked and on the Shore of Malta: it's again of epic proportions even after all that has happened. The Lord had spoken: you must testify in Rome (23:11), stand trial before Caesar (27:24) and God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you (27:24). God word to Christians today echoes clear through Paul: unless these men stay with the Ship they cannot be saved (27:31). There is but one Church with many Congregations: unity and ecumenism isn't an option it's a given: the boat is not the focus but the crew! Unity is Christ's gift and He has paid the price!

The Provide-ence of God!

This is about God's power sustaining and guiding human destiny. God who 'works out everything in conformity with the purpose of His will' (Ephesians 1:11) declares that 'there is no wisdom, no plan, no insight, that can succeed against the Lord' (Proverbs 21:30, Isaiah 8:10, 54:17) and engineers even evil 'for the good of those who love Him' (Romans 8:28, Genesis 50:20). This is seen in these chapters in complementary ways: first in bringing Paul to Rome, his desired goal, and secondly in bringing him there as a prisoner his undesired condition. It was an unexpected combination of circumstances: what lay behind it?

First, Luke intends us to marvel with him over the safe conduct of Paul to Rome. It is not so much that Paul had

said: I must visit Rome (19:21), as that Jesus had said to him, 'You must testify in Rome' (23:11). Yet circumstance after circumstance seemed calculated to make this impossible - Paul had expressed his intention to proceed straight from Jerusalem to Rome (Romans 15:25-28). Instead he was imprisoned in Caesarea, threatened with assassination by Jews, nearly drowned in the med. or killed by soldiers and then poisoned by a snake! Each incident seemed to be designed to prevent him from reaching his God-planned, God-promised destination. However it was not the forces of nature (water, wind and snake) or the worldly wisdom of man (schemes, plots and threats) which were arrayed against Paul, but the demonic forces at work through them. Scripture is full of examples of Satan seeking to thwart God's saving purpose through His people and His Christ (e.g. Pharaoh seeks to drown baby Moses, Herod tries to kill the infant Christ, the Sanhedrin try to stifle Apostolic Witness and smother the Church at its birth), and now through the storm at sea he attempted to stop Paul bringing His Gospel to the capital of the World.

But God obstructed Satan's purpose! Luke increases the excitement of his story by letting us know in advance that he would reach Rome (23:11). So we know from the beginning that he will get there but as the story proceeds and the storm becomes ever more violent, until all hope is lost, we wonder how on earth will he be rescued. Will he make it? Yes he will! He does! For he was rescued by the divine overruling, which Luke makes clear by his repeated use of the vocabulary of 'salvation' (27:20, 31, 34, 43, 44. 28: 1, 4: seven times). So Paul gets to Rome, his desired goal. What's your Rome? Do you believe God will get you there (if you step out)? Notice how Satan consistently tries to stop him, how Paul's counsel is ignored (27:10) yet that increases his future cred: God uses

it! In Newham in Brickfields Edi and three other praying women had 25 years of waiting and testing: are we that faithful/patient? Paul was delayed three years (Caesarea 2 Voyage/travel 1).

So by God's providence Paul reaches Rome safe and sound but he arrived as a prisoner! Heck!! Christ's promise that he would testify in Rome had not included that information. How was this compatible with the providence of God? It seems to me legitimate to argue that the Apostle, who was brought to Rome to witness, found his witness expanded, enriched and authenticated by his two year custody in the city.

First His witness was expanded, not only because of the constant flow of people visiting him, but especially because he witnessed to Christ in the presence of Caesar. How do we know that? Well leaving aside the possibility that Paul's deliverance 'from the lions mouth' (2 Timothy 4:17) was reference to his release by Nero, the strongest indication is Jesus' promise to Paul on the Ship, 'You must stand trial before Caesar' (27:24). If his first promise to Paul (about preaching in Rome) was fulfilled, is it likely that Luke would have included his second promise (about standing before Caesar) unless he knew that it too was fulfilled? I think not. In this case we are permitted to imagine that the prisoner who stood before Felix, Festus and Agrippa, stood before Nero also, and that in the world's most prestigious court, to the world's most prestigious person, he faithfully proclaimed Christ. Yes Nero himself, that artistic but blood thirsty genius heard the gospel from the lips of the Apostle to the Gentiles. That would not have been possible if he were not a prisoner on trial.

Secondly Paul's witness was enriched by those 2 years. It is difficult for us to conceive how such an activist as Paul managed to endure nearly 5 years of comparative inactivity,

were they wasted years? Was he champing at the bit and pawing the ground like a restless and rebellious horse? No, his prison letters breathe an atmosphere of joy, peace, patience, and contentment because he believed in the sovereignty of God. Moreover, however much he longed to get out and serve the contemporary Church, yet, as a result of his 2 years partial withdrawal in Rome; he has left to us, in his four prison letters, an even richer spiritual legacy. Probably Paul neither knew nor understood this, but we do. Of course Paul did not write all his letters in prison but there is something distinctive and special about those he did. It is not only that he had more time to reflect and pray; it is also that the substance of these letters owes something to his prison experience. He was facing trial and possible death, but he knew that he had already risen with Christ. He was awaiting the emperor's pleasure, but he knew the supreme authority to whom he bowed was not the Lord Caesar, but the Lord Christ. So then the three main prison letters (E, P & C) set forth more powerfully than anywhere else the supreme, sovereign, undisputed and unrivalled Lordship of Jesus. Was it not though his very confinement that his eyes were opened to see the victory of Christ and the fullness of life, power and freedom which is given to those who belong to Christ. Paul's perspective was adjusted, his horizon extended, his vision clarified and his witness enriched by his prison experience.

Thirdly his witness was authenticated by his sufferings

Nothing proves the sincerity of our beliefs like our willingness to suffer for them. So Paul had to suffer, and be seen to suffer, for the gospel he was preaching. It was not only that in Isaiah the servant who brings light to the nations must suffer, that the vocations to service and suffering are intertwined, that the witness and the martyr are one and that the seed which multiplies is the seed that dies (John

12:24). It is also that Paul was suffering for his gospel (2 Timothy 2:8-9), for the 'mystery' revealed to him that Jews and Gentiles were equal members of the Body of Christ. That is why he could write of 'my sufferings for you' (Ephesians 3:13) and could describe himself as Christ's prisoner 'for the sake of you Gentiles' (Ephesians 3:1). Paul's arrest, imprisonment and trials were all due to his uncompromising espousal of the Gentile cause. It was because of his witness to the Gentiles that the Jews rose up in such a fury against him. Paul paid dearly for his loyalty to the freeness and universality of the gospel. But his appeals to the Churches to live a life worthy of the gospel were all the more authentic because he was himself a prisoner on account of the gospel. He was ready to die for it; they must live to adorn it.

Was Paul released after the two years Luke mentions? He clearly expected to be (Philippians 1:19-26, Phm 22). And the pastoral letters (Titus and Timothy) supply evidence that he was, for Paul resumed his travels for about two more years before being re-arrested, re-tried, condemned and executed in AD64. By then he could write that he had fought the good fight, finished the race, and kept the faith (2 Timothy 4:7). Now the next generation must step into his shoes and continue the work. Just as Lukes gospel ended with the prospect of a Mission to the nations, so the Acts ends with the prospect of a Mission radiating from Rome to the world. Luke's description of Paul preaching 'with boldness' and 'without hindrance' symbolises a wide open door through which you and I in our day have to pass. The Acts of the Apostles have long ago finished. But the Acts of the Holy Spirit enacted through the followers of Jesus will continue until the end of the World and their words will spread to the ends of the Earth.

**Pastor David
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