

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Acts 27 and 28 - Paul at Rome

“All roads lead to Rome” – so ran the popular saying in the ancient world. Rome was the jewel in the crown of the Roman Empire, a symbol of power and glory. As we come to the last talk in this series on ‘The first page of Christian history’ and as we come to these last two chapters of the Acts of the Apostles, so the focus now shifts to Rome.

We have seen, in recent talks, how Paul’s deep concern for his distressed Jewish brethren led him to take financial relief to Jerusalem, despite the obvious risks of such a visit. Taken prisoner there by the Roman authority, he was subsequently taken to Caesarea for his own safety. There he lay in prison for two years until brought to trial before King Agrippa who found him completely innocent of all the charges laid against him. He would have been set free apart from the fact that he had appealed to Caesar. Roman law demanded, therefore, that he appear in Caesar’s presence.

As we begin this morning in Acts 27, the story opens somewhere around AD 60. Paul had been converted to Christ on the road to Damascus around AD 35, only a year or two after the death of Jesus. At that time, Ananias had been sent to him with the prophetic words from the Lord Jesus, “Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel. For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name’s sake” (Acts 9:15 and 16). Now Paul was to bear witness to Christ before Caesar in Rome, the very heart of the then known world.

We know that for many years Paul had had a deep desire to visit the Christians in Rome. He had written them a letter, probably just before his final visit to Jerusalem, in which he touchingly tells them, “For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift, so that you may be established – that is, that I may be encouraged together with you by the mutual faith both of you and me. Now I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that I often planned to come to you (but was hindered until now), that I might have some fruit among you also, just as among the other Gentiles ... So, as much as is in me, I am ready to preach the gospel to you who are in Rome also” (Romans 1:11-15). At the end of that letter, he adds, “Having a great desire these many years to come to you, whenever I journey to Spain, I will come to you. For I hope to see you on my journey, and to be helped on my way there by you, if first I may enjoy your company for a while...I know that when I come to you, I shall come in the fullness of the blessing of the gospel of Christ” (15:22-29).

But never would he have imagined himself coming to Rome as Caesar’s prisoner! When he had been taken into the Roman barracks in Jerusalem for his own protection, we are told, “But the following night the Lord stood by him and said, “Be of good cheer, Paul; for as you have testified for me in Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness at Rome”” (Acts 23:11).

So here he was, being sent from Caesarea to Rome as a prisoner! Hadn’t God made a terrible mistake? Wasn’t this a terrible waste of his gift when he might have been such a blessing to the Christians in Rome? What would there be for him to do in a prison at Rome? So we might have argued had we been in his shoes. Yet, as we shall see, this was no mistake on God’s part for out of all this God would bring blessing not only to Paul, and to the Christians in Rome, but to us in our day too.

Have you ever wondered, as you look at the disappointments in your life, at plans that haven’t worked out as you would wish, that God is making a terrible mistake? Perhaps, even, that He doesn’t care about you any longer? Then let us take heart from this record of Paul that God’s plans, in His own time, are perfect. As wise King Solomon wrote, “He has made everything beautiful in its time” (Ecclesiastes 3:11). It has been aptly remarked that God’s disappointments are His appointments. Paul would learn, as we need to learn, that whatever the situation in life, “There’s a work for Jesus none but you can do”, as the well-known hymn puts it.

In looking at this record of Paul’s journey to Rome and his stay there, it will be helpful to focus on two things:

1. God’s protection of Paul.
2. God’s purpose for Paul.

God's protection of Paul.

Paul, with other prisoners, was sent under armed guard under the centurion, Julius, by boat to Rome, no easy journey in those days. God must have moved Julius' heart to allow Paul, when the ship docked at Sidon, "to go to his friends and receive care" as Acts 27:3 tells us. What a comfort that must have been to Paul in his deprived circumstances!

Sailing in the Mediterranean Sea was always more difficult in the winter. Paul, as a seasoned traveller, advised finding a safe harbour in which to winter, but the centurion, at the urging of the helmsman and the owner of the ship, decided to continue. Not surprisingly, they soon ran into a terrible storm. The graphic details which follow in the rest of the chapter are counted amongst the finest literature of the ancient world. The chapter has been called 'one of the most instructive documents for the knowledge of ancient seamanship'. But it is not for those reasons that the chapter is of interest to us this morning. The chapter is a wonderful record of the preserving grace of God over his servant, Paul, and all those with him in the ship. Read it carefully after the broadcast.

"Now when neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small tempest beat on us, all hope that we should be saved was finally given up" (verse 20). In that situation of absolute hopelessness, Paul tells them, "I urge you to take heart, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. For there stood by me this night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve, saying, "Do not be afraid, Paul; you must be brought before Caesar; and indeed God has given you all those who sail with you." Therefore take heart, men, for I believe God that it will be just as He told me. However, we must run aground on a certain island" (verses 20-26).

I love that ringing declaration of Paul, "I believe God". That trust in God underpinned the whole of Paul's life. Let that same trust in God underpin your life and mine! There is not time to look at all the details of the story. Eventually, the ship ran aground and began to break up. Again, God's protection is seen. The soldiers wanted to kill the prisoners. That would have been the end of Paul and all his hopes for Rome. But the centurion decreed otherwise. We read, "But the centurion, wanting to save Paul, kept [the soldiers] from their purpose, and commanded that those who could swim should jump overboard first and get to land, and the rest, some on boards, and some on broken pieces of the ship. And so it was that they all escaped safely to land" (verses 43-44).

But Paul's troubles were not yet over. Landing on the island of Malta, they were all made welcome by the locals, yet another part of God's provision and protection. Incidentally, there is still a St. Paul's Bay in Malta. A fire was built to protect them from the rain and cold. When Paul gathered up a bundle of sticks to add to the fire, a viper crawled out and fastened on his hand. Paul was able to shake it off into the fire without suffering any harm (Acts 28:1-6). God was determined to have His servant in Rome!

The father of the leading citizen of the island was seriously ill with fever and dysentery. Through the mercy of God, Paul was able to heal him and others on the island who came to Paul to be healed (verses 7-10).

Long before '*The Top of the Pops*' (that shows how old I am!), there was a popular song whose words ran, "If I can help somebody as I journey on, then my living will not be in vain". Even in the very difficult circumstances of a travelling prisoner, Paul was able to help others for Christ's sake. That pattern of his life would be repeated at Rome, as we shall see.

After three months on Malta, a ship was found to take Paul and the other prisoners to Rome. Landing in Italy, they made their way up the well-known Appian Way towards Rome. Two of the stopping places along the way were Appii Forum and Three Inns (verse 15), the first about 43 miles south of Rome, and the latter about 33 miles. In both these places, Christians from Rome made that long journey to meet this dear servant of God about whom they would have heard so much. And so Paul's longed for wish to meet his beloved Roman brethren was finally realised! Yet how different were the circumstances from those he had planned. How much the deep concern and love of these Roman Christians must have boosted Paul's spirit! In this way, God provided just the right encouragement for His servant at the right time. As the hymn puts it,

*"God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform."*

God's purpose for Paul

Having looked at God's protection for His servant, we now want to go on to look at God's purpose for Paul. Paul spent two whole years under house arrest in Rome, but with the liberty to receive all who came to him (verse 30). At the earliest opportunity, Paul, with his deep longing for the salvation of his fellow Jews (see Romans 10:1), called together some of the leading Jews in Rome so that he might explain to them the circumstances which led up to his imprisonment and, especially, tell them about the Lord Jesus and the salvation which He now offered to both Jews and Gentiles. Some, but not all of the Jews, believed. So already this was no time-wasting imprisonment but, rather,

God was giving Paul to see fruit in the Gospel as a result of his preaching. It is not possible to fit all the details we learn from Paul's epistles within the last two verses of the Acts of the Apostles. It is generally assumed that after his house arrest and preliminary trial around AD 63, Paul enjoyed a time of liberty before his final imprisonment and martyrdom around AD 65. It is, perhaps, of that preliminary trial that Paul writes, "At my first defence, no one stood with me, but all forsook me...But the Lord stood with me and strengthened me, so that the message might be preached fully through me, and that all the Gentiles might hear. And I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion" (2 Timothy 4:16 and 17).

We can trace at least three other strands in the purpose of God for His servant in prison. Tradition has it that it was here in Rome that Paul wrote his 'prison epistles' i.e. Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon. Here was no sulking servant holed up in a corner, moaning at God for what seemed a total waste and a total mistake! Rather, here was a servant who would declare, "I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content" (Philippians 4:11). Paul was content to use the free time afforded by his imprisonment – free time which he never had under the pressures of his missionary journeys. We today stand in all the blessing of that written ministry. What a hard lesson it still is for us to accept from God those daily circumstances which He allows to come into our lives! But instead of blaming God for them, we need to be able to hand them over to Him and ask Him to work out His good and perfect will through us. As it has been well-said, Let go, and let God!

A second strand in the purpose of God for Paul is found in what he writes to the Philippian church: "But I want you to know, brethren, that the things which happened to me have actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel, so that it has become evident to the whole palace guard, and to all the rest, that my chains are in Christ; and most of the brethren in the Lord, having become confident by my chains, are much more bold to speak the word without fear" (Philippians 1:12-14). Just as God had allowed Paul and Silas to be put in prison at Philippi so that a Roman gaoler might be brought to Christ (see Acts 16), so now in Rome, Roman guards are hearing that same good news of the Saviour! More than that, the Christians at Rome, spurred on by Paul's suffering, are more eager than ever to preach the Gospel. This was certainly no mistake on God's part!

A third strand in the purpose of God is seen in Paul's letter to Philemon. It was in Rome that Philemon's slave, Onesimus, who had run away from Colossae, was brought to Paul and, through Paul, was brought to know the Lord Jesus as his Saviour. Paul would have loved to keep Onesimus with him, but he knew that Onesimus rightly belonged to Philemon to whom he sends him back with this letter. Paul knew that Onesimus's life, as a run-away slave, might be forfeit and tenderly pleads with Philemon to spare him. Take time to read this brief but lovely letter. It breathes Christian love and courtesy. Paul's imprisonment was certainly used by God in ever-widening circles of blessing!

As our study of Paul in Rome draws to a close, we cannot do better than read from his second letter to Timothy, probably written just before Paul's martyrdom in Rome: "For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing" (2 Timothy 4:6-8). Farewell, Paul, good and faithful servant!

Let us be encouraged this morning as we think back over God's protection and God's purpose for Paul. That same protection and that same sense of purpose in life are ours to lay hold on also. We close with some words of Joseph Parker's hymn:

*God holds the key of all unknown,
And I am glad:
If other hands should hold the key,
Or if He trusted it to me,
I might be sad.*

*What if tomorrow's cares were here
Without its rest?
I'd rather He unlocked the day,
And, as the hours swing open, say,
"My will is best."*

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