

Text: Acts 28.14-31
St Stephen's

July 20, 2008
Sun

And So We Came to Rome

It has taken us at St Stephens 11 months to walk through this 28 chapter journey – a history of some 32 years dating from the resurrection of Jesus in Jerusalem to the arrival of Paul in Rome.

Today we come to the last chapter of Acts, and I want to point out two verses that frame the whole book of Acts, from the first and last chapters:

while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father...

Acts 1:4

And so we came to Rome.

Acts 28:14

These two verses are **bookends** to the journey of Acts. It really is a **travelogue**, framed by a 'tale of two cities', the story of the movement of the gospel **from the heart of Israel in Jerusalem to the heart of the empire in Rome. Not everyone** knew that this journey would be the framework of these 30 years. It would be some 22 or 23 years before Paul, in Ephesus on his third missionary journey, was clear that he must go to Rome...

Paul resolved in the Spirit to pass through Macedonia and Achaia and go to Jerusalem, saying, "After I have been there, I must also see Rome."

Acts 19:21

Look at that little word, '**must**'. It was clear to Paul that Rome lay ahead, that Rome was on God's map. And Luke tells us that he '**resolved in the Spirit**' to complete that third mission trip, ending in Jerusalem, and then move onto Rome. It was a **deep 'yes'** within him to God's emerging plan. He would need every bit of that deep resolution...

He got **further affirmation** of that guidance in Jerusalem, when everything had gotten very difficult. You remember how it went: a **riot**

broke out in the Temple, he was **beaten** by the mob and **rescued** and arrested by the Roman guards...

The following night the Lord stood by him and said, "Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome."

Acts 23:11

There are both cities again, and there is that word '**must**' again - this time from the lips of the risen Lord Jesus. **Rome it would be.**

Well, ok. **You would think** he would get out of jail, catch a boat in Caesarea and head for Rome. A month later he's there. God opens the doors, God makes it happen...

But it turned out to be **a very different journey**, taking about 4 years in all...

- Arrested in Jerusalem
- He was examined by some 6 different courts
- Threatened by two assassination plots
- Imprisoned two years in Caesarea
- Appeals to Caesar and is put on a ship as a prisoner
- Almost drowned in the storm and shipwreck
- Almost killed by the soldiers as they abandon ship
- On shore he is bitten and poisoned by a snake
- Finally, he arrives at Rome, and remember, in chains.

Who would write that script? It seems straight out of Hollywood! You would think it was an episode of '**Mission Impossible**'! We could call it, "**Against All Odds...**"

He has been promised safe passage, but **all along the way, everything is at risk!** Stott (402): *"Each incident seemed to be designed to prevent him from reaching his God-planned, God-promised destination."* Do you remember Luke's phrase in the middle of the storm about how bad it got?

When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small tempest lay on us, all hope of our being saved was at last

abandoned.

Acts 27:20

This is **over the top opposition**. And you have to ask, **'Is something else going on here?'** Well, yes. It gets clear after a while: this is not just the **plans of men** and the **forces of nature** that seemed to be arrayed against Paul, but behind them and through them was the hand of a dark lord, **demonic forces** of an evil kingdom, who threw all they had against Paul and his little mission team.. Again and again it looked like they were to be swept away!

Here's the question: **What got him through?**

Well, for starters there was the heroic effort and endurance of Paul. You can't miss this. As you watch Paul respond there are moments of quick action, patient endurance, bold speech, all-night prayer sessions, weeks of sharp suffering, lengthy thought, hard labor, long journeys on foot, prophetic utterance, years under arrest, carefully written letters, thoughtful legal strategies, and several voyages at sea.

So there it is. In seasons of overwhelming opposition and severe hardship, **you need heroic effort and endurance** to get through it. So... **buck up! Get a grip! Quit whining!!** We might call this the Senator Phil Graham strategy (called Americans a bunch of whiners because of our concerns about the economy – got him fired from the McCain campaign).

But Paul's analysis of what got him through is a bit different; he saw something else at play:

By the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God which is with me.

1 Corinthians 15:10

But it would be **wrong** to be **so impressed** by the efforts and sufferings of the Apostle that we missed something far greater. *"It was not I, but the grace of God which is with me."*

God got them there, no matter the risk, the danger, the difficulties, the restraints. That is Luke's theme summed in his little phrase: *"And so we arrived in Rome"*.

Luke means for us to be impressed with the strength of God, with the faithfulness of God, with the capability of God, with the competence of God.

In every dangerous moment along this remarkable journey, it is the Lord Jesus who appears, or an angel who guides, or an 'unlikely circumstance' that opens a door of escape.

- **Hostile jailors** become team members.
- **Arrogant kings** become unwitting servants of the Gospel.
- **Angry mobs** just serve to launch the gospel into unreached regions.
- **Religious pride** among people of great spiritual privilege becomes the occasion for good news coming to outsiders.
- **Shipwrecks** turn into another mission stop. (YWAM team's strategy: bus breaks down, plant a church!)

Every obstacle in the end is turned into a servant of Paul and his gospel, from shipwreck to snake.

- **He is in chains, but** he appears before kings and emperors right up to the top of the Roman empire, and bears faithful, courageous testimony to Jesus before them all.
- **He spends years in jail, but** from those years come the **prison epistles**: the letters to the Colossians, to the Ephesians, to the Philippians – arguably the letters with the greatest clarity and vision of all his works. They, among all his letters, see the cosmic scope of Christ's work, into eternity past, presiding over the creation of all things, into history present, through his sacrifice and resurrection, ruling into eternity to come till that day when every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord. He shall have supremacy. He has name and rank far above all others. He is the destiny of every living being. These affirmations, this cosmic vision came out of those years in hard confinement.
- **He is beaten**, arrested, confined, tried, wrecked, and under guard.

But Luke writes, '*And so we came to Rome.*'

It is the hand of God behind it all; he is the unseen conductor of the orchestra whose music prevails, He is the author of the play whose storyline emerges...

No wisdom, no understanding, no counsel can avail against the Lord.

Proverbs 21:30

Take counsel together, but it will come to nothing; speak a word, but it will not stand, for God is with us.

Isaiah 8:10

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

Romans 8:28

In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will...

Ephesians 1:11

This is the God who is for you when everything is against you.

This is the Lord who can make hardship and opposition his – and your – servants.

For those who love him... because they have been loved by him... he works all things into his purposes. Not a single thing is left out – not your hardships, not your circumstances, not Satan's thrusts, not your own failures – he folds it all into his good and gracious purposes.

He is fully competent. He is at your side. He is Lord.

Behold your God.