

BOOK OF ACTS PART 3

Chapters 19 - 28

Resuming the Bible Studies after Easter we began by looking at Chapter 19 with Paul in Ephesus on his Third Missionary Journey.

Part 1 (1 – 12) was very much concerned with the ‘accidental’ life of the early believers as they experienced Pentecost and their response to the many and varied situations that they encountered. They were learning to practise being “*witnesses unto me*” with all that that entailed.

Part 2 (13 – 18) is taken up with the corporate response through deliberate action in taking that gospel to “*the uttermost parts of the earth*” largely by means of coordinated and representative ventures which took them to Asia and to Europe at first to the Jews, and also to the Gentiles. Although carried out by delegated and commissioned individuals there was a corporate sense in terms of accountability and fellowship, with Councils taking universal and far-reaching decisions as in Chapter 15.

When we come to Part 3 the focus seems to narrow down on Paul himself and what was happening to him. That starts with his time in Ephesus where he encounters several strange incidents.

When he comes to Ephesus (as promised during his fleeting visit at the end of the Second Journey) he meets a dozen ‘disciples’ and asks them whether they had received the Holy Spirit. It became obvious that they had not had of a Holy Spirit and their adoption of Christianity had been based on an incomplete gospel. Whether that was related to Apollos’ ministry there before being ‘corrected’ by Aquila and Priscilla is not mentioned. But, taking no chances Paul lays hands on them and they encounter a transformational experience accompanied by spectacular expression just as happened at Pentecost. Expression, as in inebriated behaviour, is often linked with encounters of the Holy Spirit in Scripture. Maybe we need to learn something about spontaneity of expression.

From there Paul went into the synagogue and continued his regular practice of reasoning from the Scripture only to be strongly opposed (and The Way ridiculed). He left there – and his concentration on the Jews – and went next door to Tyrannus’ lecture hall where he remained for two years, discussing with the disciples.

It is clear from all this activity that the gospel was being spread far and wide in the region through the witness of many.

There then follows accounts of happenings that are difficult to appreciate. It seemed that Paul was being endowed with supernatural powers to ‘perform miracles’ with blessing and healing being transferred through contact with handkerchiefs and garments. An extension

of this supernatural phenomenon was the practice of casting out demons practised by some from very dubious motives, such as in the case of the sons of Sceva. When the artificiality of such practice was exposed it had an effect on the larger company. Conscious of the overwhelming sense of God's presence nominal believers who secretly practised '*the secret arts*' came under deep conviction and amended their ways. Such is the effect of Revival that the presence of God generates conviction that exposes compromise and luke-warmness through public confession and repentance. O to see revival and its spiritual effects in our day.

The sequel is that Paul – Paul himself, now, not his team – expresses an aspiration to leave this scene and go to Jerusalem and eventually to Rome. That surely is not for negative reasons but part of his response to his calling. Eventually he does get there but in the meantime is stuck in Ephesus where the effect of conversion through the gospel means that traditional pagan practices, such as the worship of Diana / Artemis, is adversely affected. The riot that followed was subsequently quelled by the Town Clerk and peace established. But Paul's time at Ephesus was at an end even though he still had an opportunity to share his testimony with the elders as we shall see in the next chapter.

Chapter 20

When it became obvious that there was little welcome from the general populace in Ephesus for Paul he went across the water to Greece and then Macedonia. His main concern there, as it had been in Asia, was to encourage the believers, to inject courage into them, so that they stood firm.

Interestingly enough, companions who accompanied him on these excursions were converts from previously difficult places – a tribute to the grace of God in the establishment of strong believers in spite of great opposition. God will always triumph.

Continuing his travels, he on foot while some of his companions went by ship, they met up in Troas where he spent seven days. On the final day, breaking bread with the believers, he found himself talking well into the night. Significantly, he had so much he wanted to share with them and bless them with his experience of God's dealings with him over the years. Sadly the soporific effect was that Eutychus fell from the third story window but was miraculously restored by Paul, much to the relief of the believers.

From there they proceeded towards Jerusalem but found time to rendezvous with the Ephesian elders at Miletus where Paul had farewell to them. In doing so he provides a number of valuable insights.

Indicating that this would be the last opportunity of seeing him in person he reminds them of what he has done so far. He does not (in this instance although he does so in later incidents) say anything about his conversion but does declare that he has not held back from sharing things / truths with them that were beneficial and helpful in their Christian

witness. He had endeavoured to preach the “*whole counsel of God*” and so was innocent of their blood in that any rejection was of their volition not from his not telling them. His message had been ‘*of repentance towards God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ*’ He was aware that further hardship would await him in Jerusalem but that meant nothing to him in the humble disposition he had adopted as a believer and servant of God. He was satisfied that he was on track to have ‘*finished his course*’.

Turning to them as elders of the church he charges them with looking after the flock. Much is said in his writings about the work and role of elders – or overseers – both in terms of their ministry and in their testimony and standing. Their responsibility was to be shepherds (whose chief attributes were spelled out by the Lord Jesus in John 10). Like the ‘bad shepherds’ of that discourse there would be ‘wolves’ emerging and seeking to destroy the flock. Based on his own understanding and example he made it clear to them that the distinguishing feature of a good shepherd is generosity – giving.; whereas that which typified the wolf was gain and greed.

Although he knew – and they were aware – that difficulties lay ahead he “commended (them) to God and the word of His grace”. That would be more than sufficient to encourage them and meet their needs in the years ahead.

Meanwhile, he bid farewell much to their sorrow as they wept and escorted him to the boat.

Before we follow that journey to Jerusalem and eventually to Rome it is worth taking some time to reflect on what he would later want to say to these believers in the Epistle to the Ephesians and its companion letter the Epistle to Colossians. That will take us over the next two weeks.

Ephesians

Our first ‘pit-stop’ is at Ephesus. The final meeting with the elders at Miletus have given us some insight to the extent Paul valued this group of believers and their witness both in Ephesus and the surrounding areas. Now, at the end of his ministry, a captive in Rome, he writes to them to encourage and inspire them in their continued witness.

In the sharing together of the many gems encountered in the book several thoughts emerged, none more so that the concept of our being his “*masterpiece*” – the product of His craftsmanship, “to the praise of His glory”. That we should be chosen and adopted to pursue the destination He has envisaged is wonderful and that He has made provision for the generation of that – by grace. Prayer and insight were also stressed as was the need to collaborate. Very important was the need to use the WHOLE armour of God and to be conscious of His glory and the gloriousness of His bounty and benevolence. These were very precious thoughts which emerged from fresh reading of this familiar but wonderful letter.

Devoted to them at the early stage (of the Missionary Journeys) with his teaching and encouragement he still has them in mind as he is confined in Rome awaiting final trial. He takes the opportunity of reflecting on all that has happened and all that could yet happen for them.

Taking the letter as a whole that covers three main aspects.

Blessing

The first (Chapters 1 – 3) is immense thankfulness for them that, having heard the word of truth, they had become believers and had been sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise. That is reflected in reminding them of the unmeasurable blessings that have come to them and a longing that their understanding and appreciation of their destiny should increase. They already had experienced it in being made alive by grace and brought into the kingdom through the merits of the Cross. Thus regenerated they had – with all (other) saints been built on a good foundation and become “*the habitation of God by the Spirit*”.

- Blessings**
- Chosen
 - Redeemed
 - Prayed for
 - Made alive
 - Brought nigh
 - Habitation of God
 - Mystery
 - Exceeding abundantly

This was a mystery that Paul was privy to and so he encouraged them to reach an understanding that God wanted to manifest His glory and power through the church. AS a privileged people, saved by grace, they were chosen ones as living demonstrations of the glory and ability of an amazing God who “*is able to do exceedingly abundantly above*” anything imagined.

Responsibility

While salvation and Christian experience is the work of a benevolent God there is also complementary responsibility on the recipients of that grace. So, the first exhortation is to “*walk worthy of the vocation*” and live a distinctive life. That has its

- Testimony**
- Walk worthy – collaborate – unity
 - Change behaviour - be different from
 - Walk in the light as children of God
 - Understand what the will of the Lord is
 - Express your new life
 - Responsible, informed and exemplary relationships

challenges and so hr stress is on collaboration with other believers, substance and integrity and above all unity and progression so that it becomes a **masterpiece**: something comprising many components in harmony each contributing to a total presentation.

Rather than be esoteric that is manifested in very practical – even mundane – situations. Implicit is deliberate abandonment of old, sinful, natural practices (put off the old man) and the conscious adoption of a new way of living informed and inspired by an understanding of the will and purpose of God. No longer is it a matter of satisfying the desires of the flesh and living to oneself but a transformation inspired by living in the light and practising love and grace; giving room to natural emotions but keeping them under strict control. (cf Philippians” *“let your moderation be known to all men”*) The obvious context for that is the home, the family and work – some challenge.

Protection

Finally, (Chapter 6: 10 – 20) it is a matter of defending and safeguarding such a precious testimony, always subject to attack by the evil one. As part of the whole project equipment for doing that is supplied in the form of *“the whole armour of God”* which can defend against the wiles of the devil and protect the testimony. While most of the items are essentially defensive, two enable attack.

The one is the Sword of the word of God, always powerful and creative, as it was in Genesis 1 and on subsequent occasions. It is the Word that guides the believer and the corporation of believers in promoting the faith and building up the church. As Peter was to say: *“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life”*.

The second is prayer: characterised by requests but reflective of an acknowledgement of and an absolute trust in God.

Though under ‘house arrest’ in Ephesus Paul encouraged the church in Ephesus with its mixed-background members. He did the same with Colossae and the churches which existed in that area of Asia where he had laboured faithfully over the years.

We shall look at Colossians next time.

Colossians

Although Colossae was a city it was one of several in this area of Asia where the gospel clearly had been preached and its good news spread widely around the region. Paul himself, supposedly, had never met the Colossian believers but he was interested in them and those around so much so that he encouraged the sharing of letters that he sent to each church.

Protect

- Stand against the schemes of the devil
- Wrestle against principalities and powers
- Put on the whole armour of God:
 - Belt of truth
 - Breastplate of righteousness
 - Shod with gospel of peace
 - Shield of faith
 - Helmet of salvation
- Sword of the Spirit
- Prayer

Writing to them from his 'confinement' in Rome, Paul makes it clear that he is thankful for them and to hear of the acceptance, effect and spread of the gospel in the area.

As with Ephesians, he reminds them of the blessings they are recipients of. Their testimony is one of faith and love, and of hope in what lies ahead. They are recipients because, having heard the message, they have believed and so been "*translated from the kingdom of darkness (their natural environment) to the Kingdom of His dear Son*". That Son is Christ himself, the full embodiment of God Himself. He is the Creator and the head of the church. In becoming Christians they have inherited that same Christ who has reconciled them to God by the blood of his cross.

Declaring that he "*has not ceased to pray for them*" he makes it clear that his desire for them is to see them grow and develop as "*citizens of heaven*" so that their way of life is pleasing to God and reflects the distinctive life of that divine kingdom.

As one who is privileged to be the messenger, and the one to reveal the mystery to the Gentiles, he states that the revealed mystery is "*Christ in you*". That very Son indwells them with all his presence and power. Naturally he wants them to maintain this progress and so he tells them that the key to such development is to continue in the same way as they originally received: by letting this all-sufficient Christ " *dwell in their hearts by faith*". He prays for their strengthening, endurance and, above all, understanding, because they have been "*translated*" from their natural kingdom into a heavenly one".

The fact that they 'live here' but 'belong there' brings its challenges. In the natural environment they are surrounded by (earthly = non-seeing) influences which focus on observable rituals, rules and philosophies. It follows that they then are pressurised to observe these and conform to societal practice with its emphasis on doing the right thing.

What they are now party to is, however, very different: they have the Son, the incarnation of God dwelling in them: they need nothing else. They are complete in Him.

Through Christ – and his death and resurrection – they have been '*circumcised*' and effectively disconnected from the world. He has set them free from 'the world'. He has destroyed the principalities and powers and made an open show of them. Their registration for becoming citizens of heaven is both comprehensive and complete. Their baptism expressed that disconnection and their full identification as members of the new realm.

The reality of that 'new creation' lays an obligation on them of '*setting your sights on the realities of heaven*". No longer do they respond to the things of this world; indeed they should put them to death (reminiscent of Romans 6 and Ephesians 4) and no longer engage in any earthly behaviour.

Rather they are to express and practise that which is holy and helpful, bound in harmony, clothed in tender-hearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Allowing the

word of Christ to “*dwell in you richly*” and teaching each other they are to “*sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to God with thankful hearts doing everything diligently as representatives of the Lord Jesus*”.

The new life is also to be manifested in domestic and work-place contexts reflecting the standards and attitudes of the heavenly country.

And, all of that is made effective by diligent prayer and the utilisation of opportunities. In all of this they are surrounded by an extensive army of helpers in fellowship.

There is no doubt that responding positively to this understanding of God’s purpose and appreciation of the need for continuing commitment, the prospects are good. Taking the analogy of the sower what is planted will grow and flourish. But what of the planter?

We now return to pursue the planter, Paul, and his quest to go to Jerusalem and eventually to Rome. We’ll see that next week.

Chapter 21

Fresh in Paul’s mind is the farewell meeting with the Ephesian elders in Miletus. There he confessed to them that the Holy Spirit had made it clear to him that difficulties awaited him in Jerusalem. Yet he was prepared for that.

Now on his way, he was surrounded by the believers who had witnessed his “*good confession*” and who now accompanied him on this final trip aware that he (and presumably they) felt such a parting painful. Nor was it easy, for it meant a great deal of negotiation and endeavour to procure transport to Tyre.

When they got there, they sought out the believers, stayed with them for a week, listened to their plea for him not to go to Jerusalem but to no avail. That degree of concern was evident in the next stopping place also where even the prophet Agabus gave a specific warning. What they said was sincere and inspired and sincere but Paul was determined and resolute that he should go. Recognising the strength of this they ‘gave up’ and accepted it as the Lord’s will.

The issue of ‘conflicting guidance’ is intriguing. It represents a difference of motive and finally rests on personal conviction.

For them now it meant recognising his commitment and offering him full-hearted support even though it transpires that he would be facing it alone. Support is one of the lessons from these incidents. The original commission to be “*witnesses unto Me*” had been to the company of disciples. Later, as time developed, it became focused on a few and, in this case, one man who, since his conversion, carried out a significant ministry. It is an important lesson for us to exercise support for the work of God. And, to do so as a fellowship.

Otherwise it is 'left to others'. Equally that means trusting individual guidance and commitment. The actual execution of effective Christian service is the result of personal commitment and resolutely carrying it out despite the cost.

In the second part of this chapter Paul is reporting to the Jerusalem leaders what God has accomplished through his endeavours. They, in turn, rejoice at this and recognise that serious challenges lie ahead.

One of these is that the many Jerusalem (Jewish) converts are still adhering to the Law and its demands. So Paul agrees to demonstrate his own commitment to OT customs and embarks on a purification course in order to silence any critics.

However, unexpected critics suddenly appear – as it were from nowhere – and incite the crowd by making false accusations with the result that there is an uproar and a riot in full swing. It is so serious that the Roman authorities step in and arrest Paul for his protection.

But, here, we see the Providence and the Sovereignty of God come into force. Paul's knowledge of Greek, his Roman citizenship and his conviction are such that he is enabled to claim an opportunity to address the crowd with an explanation. Furthermore, that experience – the substance of which we will look at next week – opens the way for him to witness to very many and eventually from Rome proclaim his message of the gospel of which he is "*not ashamed*".

From being a minor skirmish in the provinces Paul, by the foreknowledge and providence of God, finds himself in the "*semi-final*" in Jerusalem in full public view and eventually will be in the "*Final*" in Rome and watched by the whole world.

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

Chapter 22

The main difference between the situation at the end of Chapter 21 and Chapter 22 is that Paul is now in custody for his own protection. It is both a safeguard for him and also a wonderful opportunity of which he takes full advantage. Being assured of an audience and a listening – made more potent by speaking in the naïve Aramaic language, he offers a defence and an explanation of who he is and what he stands for.

Starting with his origin as a citizen of Tarsus but brought up and educated in Jerusalem he recounts all the virtues of his early experiences. What he gained at home was further reinforced during his formative years so that he became exceedingly zealous.

That he was totally committed to the Law and the Old Testament religion is beyond question. That commitment grew to an avid zeal to protect the "old ways" and to cancel out any novel teaching. That was a fact and nowhere does Paul condemn it. Nor should we discredit the advantages of Christian nurture whether at home or church.

But, as is the inevitable course of fallen nature, the means was becoming an end; the form was becoming more important than the process. Thus misguided Paul was intent on total destruction of the 'opposition' or 'alternative' when he was suddenly arrested by a blinding light more brilliant than the noonday sun only to discover that he was, in fact, opposing the very truth he thought he was upholding. What a shock to be told that he was persecuting the Messiah. It stopped him in his tracks.

Blindness characterised that state until he encountered Ananias in Damascus who provided him with the "what you should do" promised by the Lord Jesus. It was when he responded to that truth that the scales from his eyes and he was able to see.

Such is essential in conversion. Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God. Salvation by faith is ensured by taking God at His word. Sincerity is not enough.

He was given further insight. God was commissioning him as a special vessel to bring the news of salvation to the Gentiles. It appears that God has his hand on key individuals at various stages to be special instruments of witness and revival. We think of people like Athanasius, Luther, Billy Graham and more recently, George Verwer.

Ananias' role was not as expansive as some of these but equally important. His willingness to meet with Paul – this known persecutor – was vital and significant. His is an example that challenges us as to whether we are in condition to be 'called upon' at short notice to perform a dangerous – but crucial – task.

Up until now the listening as astute until Paul specified that his special role was to reach the Gentiles. That caused real reaction and a burning desire to kill him.

That is where God's foreknowledge and providence comes in. They could not reach him because he was enjoying Roman protection. Not that that would have been any more comfortable until another facet of Paul's birth and upbringing became known: his Roman citizenship. It meant that he was now treated circumspectly; and would continue to enjoy the privileged opportunity that protective status afforded him as he continued to bear witness to the Council and to the intrigued Roman officials.

Such are God's ways of ensuring that his purposes are not thwarted but evidence divine use of this world's devices to further his endeavours. Surely, the wrath of man does eventually *"praise Thee"*.

We'll see more of that next week as we look at Paul's continuing witnessing to the Council, the public and the curious Roman officials.

Chapters 23 and 24

With the story of the “Acts of the Apostles” now focusing on Paul and “the things that have happened to me” we follow the sequence of events as Paul is protected from the angry crowd by the Roman authorities.

Following his speech in Aramaic to the angry crowd in Jerusalem and subsequent arrest by the Garrison Commander for safety reasons when the mob was ready to lynch him, the Commander arranges for the two parties (Paul and his opponents) to meet in court. Whatever else can be said about the Roman authorities they wanted to ensure that there was a fair hearing even though they had little understanding or sympathy with the contentious issues.

Paul opens with a declaration of his clear conscience as a believer who “*walked before God*”. Yet, that claim evoked a sharp reaction from the High Priest who slapped Paul’s face. Reacting himself, Paul rebuked the assailant but later apologised that he had spoken sharply to the High Priest while at the same time rebuking him for unlawful behaviour.

Next, discerning that the Council comprised two parties Paul declares his belief as a Pharisee in the resurrection. That incensed the Sadducees resulting in a clear case of ‘divide and rule’. The contention became so fierce that the Garrison Commander stepped in and took Paul into custody for his own protection.

It was in that context that God stepped in to encourage Paul and assure him that he would not only have the opportunity to bear witness in Jerusalem but in Rome also. It is at these times, when the servant is at his lowest, that God often steps in with that blessed assurance: “*Behold, I am with you until the end of the age*”.

Opposition anger was so intense that 40 men conspired to ambush Paul the next day under pretence of wanting to hear more. That plan was overheard by a small boy and was passed on to the Commander who immediately took steps to transfer Paul to Caesarea to be tried before Felix even though no clear evidence of wrong doing (other than internal disputes) was available.

In Caesarea there was a further opportunity to ‘try’ the case, this time before Felix the Governor. The charges brought against Paul by the Sanhedrin included accusations of his being a troublemaker, inciting riots, desecrating the Temple and crucially being the ‘ringleader’ of the ‘sect called the Nazarenes’.

Paul, in turn, denied these charges pointing out that he had openly worshipped at the Temple and had not disputed nor incited unrest. Visits to Jerusalem had been to bring financial relief to the believers and actions – like visiting the Temple to worship, while ceremonially clean – had been grossly misunderstood and unsubstantiated accusations made.

He did, however, openly confess that he was a follower of the Way – a description of the early believers and their behaviour.

Just as reference to resurrection had triggered a reaction among the Council so mention of the Way touched a nerve in Felix who, secretly, had gleaned quite an amount of knowledge and understanding of it and them. That led to further opportunities for Paul to explain more fully what the essence and teaching of the Way was when Felix and his Jewish wife Drusilla had a private audience with him.

The nerve that it touched by mentioning righteousness, self-control and judgement to come was very raw and so Felix became frightened resulting in his procrastinating a positive response until a more convenient time, meanwhile hoping for favours, such as a being offered a bribe.

The outcome was to leave Paul in prison, albeit with access to and for friends, but “bound” for two years. That is a salutary warning for us that an absence of an accepting, believing, response to “the whole counsel of God” may result in all the resources of God’s salvation remaining untapped so that, like the Hebrews, maturity was conspicuous by its absence.

Two features stand out from this chapter which could inspire us. On the one hand is Paul’s exemplar behaviour (even his humble remorse to bad mouthing the High Priest) as he stood resolute for the gospel and the welfare of God’s people. He could easily say that he was not unfaithful to the heavenly vision. He certainly ‘walked worthy of the vocation’. Secondly, while all the incidents can be explained as being contextually causal there is clearly the operation of a Superior Hand at work “*ordering the steps of a good man*” and paving the way to fulfilling God’s purpose. The forum for Paul’s witness is now the centre of the earthly empire as he is given the chance to testify to the Roman leaders and will eventually arrive in Rome.

That sequence will be considered next week in chapters 25 and 26.

Chapters 23 and 24

If it was true that Felix had “left Paul bound” in Caesarea for the two years until Festus took over it certainly was not the case of being “out of sight, out of mind” where the Jews were concerned. Festus had only been in Jerusalem a matter of days before they petitioned him to bring Paul from Caesarea to Jerusalem. Festus declined that request but, favouring the Jews, convened a court at Caesarea attended by the religious and secular authorities.

None of the many charges could be proven nor could Paul’s disclaimer be ignored. However, wishing to please (and appease?) the Jews Festus offered a ‘court hearing’ in Jerusalem which Paul flatly turned down asking to be tried before Caesar in Rome – a momentous and significant move.

In the meantime, King Agrippa had come to Jerusalem and, in conversation with Festus, learned that the latter was in a dilemma. The prisoner – Paul – was clear of any reasonable criminal charge, only some internal disputes and issues with the religious community. Having appealed to be tried in Rome, what legitimate charge could be laid against him?

Not entirely unaware of the kind of controversies that were being referred to King Agrippa and his sister Bernice asked to hear Paul for themselves. Their appearance at the audience was ostentatious and pompous in contrast with the humble Paul who, nevertheless, proceeded to recount his conversion experience. Although well-known as a devout Pharisee he was “arrested” on the way to Damascus and made aware that he was in fact working against the very God and his Messiah whom he thought he was serving. From that exchange came a commission regarding which Paul could claim that he had been fully compliant. His new ministry had been fruitful and he fulfilled – “except for these chains”.

The two key listeners – Festus and Agrippa – responded. Festus accused Paul of becoming insane through too much learning. Agrippa sarcastically accused Paul of trying to ‘convert’ him in a short time. Paul replied that, yes he was and would wish others to be converted also.

Looking back at these chapters we see some very important features.

Paul is in some kind of ‘cul-de-sac’ having gone his own way despite genuine guidance being offered to him by respected colleagues. That is often a dilemma – differing guidance. But Paul had strong motivation and clear guidance to go his way.

That took him to various arenas where he was able to address crowds and gatherings – with official support – in a way that otherwise would not have been possible. In Jerusalem he addressed the crowd in Aramaic and in Caesarea he not only addressed the multitude from the safety of Roman custody (and with the privilege of being a Roman citizen) but also in private audiences with the Civic Authorities.

That Roman governance and Roman citizenship meant that he was securely protected – and enabled. The devious Jews could neither openly kill him nor subtly trap him. Rome ensured fair trial, sound evidence, and custodial protection.

In it all, God was working out his purpose. Surely “*the wrath of man will praise thee*”. As Joseph once had reason to say: “*You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good*”. –

What seemed to Festus and Agrippa an unfortunate situation with Paul having opted for trial in Rome when he could have walked free, turned out to be of great significance.

But reaching that goal, because of the unexpected hazards of an arduous sea journey, had its own challenges, as we shall see next week.

Chapter 27

This chapter contains a graphic and vivid description of the journey by sea to Malta en-route for Rome, characterised by the fight for survival in the midst of severe storms and almost insurmountable difficulties. It is widely recognised as outstanding literary account of the situation. But, its value to us lies in the glimpses of spiritual supremacy in the face of such difficulties and disasters.

On the face of it there are several parties each with their concerns. The merchants are engaged in plying trade along the coast and further afield, such as taking grain to Rome. The Roman authorities are anxious to transport Paul (and his companions) to face trial at Rome. Paul himself is set on 'running his race' and arriving at Rome although matters are entirely outwith his control. However, these three purposes combine in making things happen demonstrating how God uses ordinary (such as Quirinius' census when Christ was born) means to fulfil his purposes.

Embarking on the journey Paul is accompanied by trusted companions. Not only is Luke there to write the "we" passages of an eyewitness but so is Aristarchus, a trusted fellow servant from Ephesus days and various experiences – many of them entailing suffering – from previous journeys. Although Paul is the main – and the only – spokesman, the presence of these companions is crucial for his support and encouragement.

From the start, cruising along the western coast, weather conditions are not favourable so they take advantage of the shelter afforded by Cyprus until they transfer to a larger ship at Myra and set sail for Rome in decreasingly favourable weather conditions. Struggling along the sheltered side of Crete they eventually consider harbouring for winter but the commercial motivations of the ones controlling the ship ignore that advice offered by Paul not to set sail and proceed into the teeth of an awful gale. They soon realise the folly of their impulsive decision and show great fear amid atrocious conditions.

It is there that Paul emerges as someone who sees over and above the immediate. He chides them for not listening to him in the first place but then assures them that, in spite of much danger, they will arrive safely. His reason for doing this is that he had had a vision and message from God, whom he faithfully served, as to what lay ahead. He could see over and above the realm of natural sight and knowledge.

That is a key distinctive of a Christian who is in touch with God, and to whom God reveals his purposes: he is a beacon, a lifeline. Thus he can provide assurance that they – who have so far disregarded God or anything other than their own blighted perceptions. God's blessings benefit the many. So Paul could reassure them that they would be preserved – all of them - and the ship reach a destination. In circumstances that were both terrifying and threatening there could be "an anchor that keeps the soul". Whereas they were 'all at sea' Paul could declare, "Sirs, I believe God". That is a distinctive.

It is significant that in a world that is showing itself to be increasingly chaotic and powerless, drifting from one disaster to another, one failure to another, leading to despair, the Christian can stand up and, not only say, I believe God, but also be able to “give a reason for the hope that is within them”.

That hope continued to the end of the journey where the natural tendency of the crew was to use tried means to survive, often to no avail while Paul’s confidence emerge as a real bulwark.

Eventually, the storm subsided but the boat was crippled. Making their way to land it floundered and became a complete shipwreck. Any attempt by the crew to escape or even to discharge its duty wrongly by killing the prisoners was thwarted and the survivors were able to make their way to the beach by swimming or using planks as a floating aid.

The story of what happened on that island of Malta and the eventual arrival and ministry in Rome is the subject of next week’s chapter.

But, before then it might be helpful to highlight some important features from this incident.

Two ‘forces’ are at work. One is the natural order of events generated by men but overseen by God. The other is the foreknowledge of God who sees what is happening and uses it to fulfil his purposes. So many have come to accept their circumstances and found it to be a case of “This is the way, walk in it”.

Support is important. Although Luke and Aristarchus and the others play no visible part in the story their presence is surely invaluable for Paul.

The outstanding lesson is Paul’s behaviour. Acquiescent and cooperative he nevertheless emerged s as the real leader because of his communion with God and his vision and that that enables him to have an influential testimony to others summed up in the confidence-inciting *I believe God*. It is important that we, too, are able to declare (with reason) that we “*believe God*”. Our world certainly needs it.

Finally, whatever ‘swimming ashore’ or floating on planks’ represents today there is a lesson for us in individual survival.

But, more was to come in the next chapter to which we turn now.

Chapter 28

After their horrendous journey across the Mediterranean they found a real haven in Malta and encountered wonderful kindness on the part of the islanders. However, an incident happened that could have adversely affected their experience. While helping build a fire Paul was bitten by a snake which the islanders superstitiously interpreted as his being found

guilty and punished by the gods. When nothing happened their view changed to one of perceiving him - not for the first time – as a god himself. It shows the fickleness of human understanding.

Subsequent events, however, proved his credentials and he was able to be instrumental in the healing of Publius' father and eventually others of the island's sick inhabitants. That was rewarded by Publius, not only accommodating Paul and his companions, but also by provisioning them for the remainder of their journey to Rome.

Their port of call in Italy was Puteoli where they spent a week in fellowship with believers. How and why that church had come into being we do not know but Paul was intent on meeting with them and sharing fellowship.

Approaching Rome, now on dry land, they encountered the same experience when Roman believers came along the Appian Way to meet and greet them – a gesture that Paul (and his companions, for they were several) really welcomed. It shows the value of the bond among Christian believers wherever they are found and regardless of whether they had met before.

In Rome itself Paul was placed under house arrest with a guard to ensure his safety and protection. Paul was not regarded as a criminal: he was under Roman protection for his own safety and therefore given scope to live and function.

He made full use of that restricted liberty.

One of his first actions was to summon the Jewish leaders to hear his explanation of why he was there. Recalling his own recent experience he told them that he had been opposed by the Jews and therefore, as a Roman citizen, had appealed for Caesar's protection. They, in turn seemed to have had little by way of adverse reporting about him, were not very concerned about him but were curious to know something about this "sect". Taking full advantage of this opportunity he proceeded to try and persuade them of the fact that Jesus was the Messiah basing his arguments on what was contained in the Scriptures. Though some believed most appear to reject his message whereupon he reminded them of the predominant characteristic behaviour of 'God's chosen nation' in not believing the message of salvation through Christ by dulling their senses and rejecting God's grace. While fatal for them it did open the door for the gospel to be shared with the Gentiles.

Turning to the Gentiles in Rome, having discharged his responsibility to the Jews, Paul makes full use of the various opportunities open to him.

Jean Donnelly, commenting on the absence of "last words" spoken by Paul in this assumed "end of life" situation that Paul was in referred to the letters he had written from this captivity. One was to Timothy, a second letter, where he speaks of his own experiences and demonstrates his ongoing, tireless and undiminished commitment to spread the word and to encourage others in their ministry and witness.

Apart from the general sense of being led and being obedient to his heavenly calling two features stand out in this chapter, namely the provision of a platform and the use Paul made of its opportunities.

Elsewhere, he tells the Philippians that what “has happened to me has turned out to the furtherance of the gospel”. Prevented from preaching in the missionary journey cities of Ephesus and even Jerusalem he now finds himself in the capital city of the Roman Empire free to meet with local personnel – some of them surely visitors from other parts – and to write letters to churches and individuals scattered across the regions and facing challenges wherever they were situated. Like John Wesley he found that “the world is my parish”. God guides His people and provides wonderful opportunities that otherwise would never happen. Surely, ‘the wrath of man’ does praise Him!

Equally significant is the use that was made of that providential opportunity. He took advantage of every occasion and means to spread the message and to teach and nurture believers, whether churches, like Ephesus or Colossae, or aggrieved individuals, like Philemon. He encouraged – and exhorted – believers and leaders in their witness despite adverse circumstances. It demonstrates what God can achieve however challenging the situation. But, it needs the unwavering commitment of individuals to enable Him to bring it to pass, individuals who use their initiative and are driven by their zeal and conviction.

His range of activity in these final years is well illustrated in the correspondence that forms a major part of our New Testament and provides us with the challenge to ‘run the race’ as he did and to be faithful stewards.

How Paul’s life finished is not recorded in Scripture although some details can possibly be gleaned from reports from that period. What is recorded is his ceaseless endeavour to fulfil his ministry right to the end.

In that sense, although we have reached Chapter 28 the Book of Acts is not finished. As a second volume of Luke’s assumed trilogy it has reached a critical stage, but the story continues to this day as the final ‘volume is being lived and may one day be recorded.

While Revelation provides a heartening glimpse into “*what shall be hereafter*” we know that “*God is working His purpose out as year succeeds to year*”. Within that scenario we should recognise the platform provides for us through often unexplainable circumstances. Not all of them are pleasant but all are positive. And, we should play our part in being “*obedient to the heavenly calling*” by prioritising and maximising our witness and our testimony here on earth, “*until He come*”.

For, as Paul wrote to the Philippians, “*It is God working within you both to will and to do of His good pleasure*”.

They are, after all, Acts of the Holy Spirit.

Epilogue

Summarising this section we have the opportunity of tracing the sovereign providence of God. Making full use of personal commitment in response to a sense of divine calling God makes use of personal conviction to fulfil his purposes in a way that the individual(s) concerned could never imagine.

Once endowed of a “heavenly vision” and conscious of understanding what the will of the Lord is, individuals – and church communities – make decisions and take actions that turn out to be significant.

In this section it is Paul’s resolve to go to Jerusalem and eventually to Rome that governs his behaviour only to turn out to be a remarkable fulfilment of a divine strategy for providing a platform and prospering the activities. From what appears to be a dead-end, a failure, (Paul consigned to house arrest in Rome) it proves to be the birthing place for a wealth of wonderful Christian literature that forms the bulk of our New Testament and has proved so helpful and inspiring to generations of Christians.

Above all, it is in reality, a combined effort. It undoubtedly reveals God’s supreme power, foreknowledge and providence. But it also requires – and expects – believer response, commitment and dedication to be faithful stewards.

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Allander Evangelical Church

16.06.2023

Appendix 1

The final meeting of the session was an overview by Manuel of the whole of the Book of Acts, presented in a series of PowerPoint slides.

Taking three key aspects he outlined the **anointing** of the early church, their pattern of **living** and their subsequent engagement in **mission**, as follows:

Anointing

- Preparation
 - 40 days teaching about the Kingdom of God
 - Wait in Jerusalem
 - Promise of the Holy Spirit

- Let them know what's to come witnessing to "Jerusalem, Asia, and uttermost parts of the earth"
 - They all joined together constantly in prayer.
- Coming of the Holy Spirit
 - Power of God indwelling the believers.
 - Peter's sermon: Jesus fulfilment of Scripture story
 - Repent and be baptised for forgiveness of sins

Living

- Devoted themselves to:
 - Apostles' teaching
 - Fellowship
 - Breaking of bread
 - Prayer
 - *...and the Lord added to their number daily.*
- Signs:
 - (e.g. healings) and preaching
 - Persecution
- Organised community
 - Unity
 - Shared goods
 - leadership:
 - spiritual
 - practical

Mission

- Through persecution
 - Believers scattered through Judea and Samaria
 - Philip sent to the Ethiopian (*the ends of the earth*)
- Organised and 'daily'
 - Paul's missionary journeys
 - Church planted in Antioch from scattered believers
- Not just to Jews but also to Gentiles
 - Holy Spirit poured on Gentiles
 - Council of Jerusalem
 - Paul and Gentiles

