

Finally . . . Rome!

Acts 28:11-29

Introduction

Someone sent some paradoxical statements to me recently. Let me read some of them to you. As I read them, perhaps they will be as convicting to you as they are to me.

- We have taller buildings, but shorter tempers; wider freeways, but narrower viewpoints; we buy more, but enjoy it less.
- We have more conveniences, but less time; more knowledge, but less wisdom; we spend too recklessly, laugh too little, drive too fast, stay up too late, get up too tired, read too seldom, watch TV too much and pray too little.
- These are the times of fast foods and slow digestion; steep profits, and shallow relationships.
- We have learned how to make a living, but not a life; we have higher incomes, but lower morals; more acquaintances, but fewer friends.
- We have learned how to rush, but not to wait.

If there was a character in the first century church who rode his chariot at top speed, it was Paul. If there was ever a man whose life ran at full throttle, it was the ambassador of Christ, the apostle Paul. If there was ever a believer who had trouble waiting instead of rushing, it would also be Paul – and everyone like him.

For the last two and a half years, God has taught Paul how to wait instead of rush. And now, at last, Paul's ship comes sailing into the Italian port of

Puteoli – he will arrive at Rome, at last.

Let us return to our story in Acts, chapter 28.

The Empire's Capital Region

We will begin with verses 11 through 15.

At the end of three months we set sail on an Alexandrian ship which had wintered at the island, and which had the Twin Brothers for its figurehead.

After we put in at Syracuse, we stayed there for three days.

From there we sailed around and arrived at Rhegium, and a day later a south wind sprang up, and on the second day we came to Puteoli.

There we found some brethren, and were invited to stay with them for seven days; and thus we came to Rome.

And the brethren, when they heard about us, came from there as far as the Market of Appius and Three Inns to meet us; and when Paul saw them, he thanked God and took courage.

The headquarters of unbelief – The home of a growing church

Paul is now just a few miles from the capital city of the Roman Empire, which is the headquarters of pagan unbelief. However, it is also the home of a growing church. Some believers from that church met Paul on the road just an hour or so away.

The key phrase that jumped off the page at me

was the phrase in verse 15b,

. . . he thanked God and took courage.

Do not ever think Paul was above the stress and pressure of his trials. Do not put him so high on a pedestal that you think he never felt discouraged or completely wiped out.

A few believers came to meet Paul and just walk beside him; perhaps with some food and drink. He was so glad to see some welcoming faces and smiles.

Don't you love people like that? They seem to know when to show up, call, or write a note. At the moment you need them, they appear; and you can do nothing other than thank God and take courage.

Then, there are other people whom you wish would never show up, right?

Types of people in your life

One author wrote about several types of people in every believer's life. Let me give them to you.

Those who sap your spiritual courage

1. There are those who sap your spiritual courage.

These are people who only take from you. They are never in the game playing with you; they are always in the stands, criticizing and complaining. Whatever you try to do is wrong; and, if they are given the chance, and they often take it, they will let you know that you are not on the mark; you have dropped the ball.

You may work next to someone like that. You may be married to someone like that. Every step you take for Christ is criticized. Every new step you attempt is met by that one or two who say, without even articulating it, "You'll never make it!" They have the incredible ability to take the wind out of your sails by simply walking past you.

Those who share your spiritual courage

2. Then, there are those who share your spiritual courage.

These are people who appreciate you. It is to these that you can share your ups and downs; your spiritual needs and failings; your desires for ministry.

They are in the game with you – transparent, refreshing.

Those who stimulate your spiritual courage

3. Then, even rarer are those who stimulate your spiritual courage.

These are the people who can inspire you to go further for God than you have ever tried. This is the mentoring believer – the parent, the older Christian, or maybe even a younger Christian – who inspires you to take steps of faith and courage.

Frequently these are people in your line of work or walk of life who are ahead of you on the path. They encourage you to follow them as they draw nearer to the Lord.

By the way, the purpose of gathering together on the Lord's day is to inspire one another on to love and good works, not check out everyone's wardrobe or share the latest gossip about whatever. We are to provoke and inspire each other to love each other and the Lord and serve Him.

So, when you go home today, the question is not, "Was the sermon good? Did you like the music?" but, "Who did you encourage in the Lord?"

Paul is on his way to inevitable suffering and perhaps, death. He is met by some Roman believers who had already paid the price. They were already the laughingstock of the empire.

Archeologists, in fact, have uncovered some first century graffiti drawn on a wall in the Palace of the Caesars in Rome. It is the picture of a man who is nailed to a cross. The body is that of a man, but the head is that of a donkey. It is an obvious insult to Christ. In the drawing, there is a man kneeling before that cross worshipping. The graffiti caption says, "Anexamenos is worshipping his God." Someone in Rome was paying the price for worshipping God.

Let me ask you what kind of believer you are. What role do you play in the lives of other believers, in the life of your church, and in the spiritual atmosphere of your home? Do you provide the constant drip of sour juice, the complaining and criticizing; or do you put your shoulder to the wheel and help move ministry and life forward? Furthermore, are you on the lookout for those who serve; for those who suffer; for those who stand for Christ? Do you cheer them on, or do you say, "You'll never make it."?

These believers in Rome met Paul just ten miles outside the city – willing to identify with the apostle in chains. Their presence and enthusiasm caused him

to thank God and take courage for the trial ahead.

The Apostle's Captive Residence

Continue to verse 16.

When we entered Rome, Paul was allowed to stay by himself, with the soldier who was guarding him.

Paul had expected to arrive in Rome and his dream had been to establish the church and freely teach and preach. Now, he is a captive, and he can preach to and disciple only those who come his way. Paul was instead, sequestered for two years by God. He spent a large portion of that time writing, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the great doctrinal truths of the Christian and the church. While Paul wanted to be out preaching, God wanted him to be inside writing.

By the way, the key phrase that informs us as to why Paul would be willing to endure his affliction is found in verse 20b,

. . . for I am wearing this chain for the sake of the hope of Israel.

“The hope of Israel” was a Messianic phrase that referred to the resurrection. In this verse, Paul relates it to the Messiah, and the fact that He has already been resurrected from the dead.

So, in order to testify of that Messiah's resurrection, Paul is willing to be kept in house arrest. He was chained to a guard who was relieved every six hours. You tell me who was the captive audience here? That Roman soldier of Caesar's was forced to listen as Paul preached and taught his visitors.

I can imagine the soldiers in the barracks looking over the schedule, “Whose got Paul duty today? Man, I was chained to him three days ago, and I listened to two sermons. Then, he kept asking me to read over what he had just written!”

Ladies and gentlemen, during his house arrest, recorded in Acts, chapter 28, the apostle Paul wrote the book of Ephesians. Maybe it was the armor of the Roman soldier chained to him that God used to provoke and inspire his pen to give that classic description of the believer's armor.

It was while in the solitude of that little apartment that Paul wrote that famous challenge to the Philippians, recorded in chapter 4, verse 8,

. . . whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there

is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things.

In other words, “Do not let your mind dwell on your chains and afflictions. Whatever is worthy of praise, think on these things.”

Was it easy for Paul to be imprisoned? No. For awhile, in that apartment, he wrote the letter to the Colossians. He ended it by saying, in chapter 4, verse 18b,

. . . Remember my imprisonment. . .

And between writings, a runaway slave came knocking – a young man named Onesimus. While Paul had intended to disciple hundreds, God brought by his path this runaway. Paul led him to faith and then returned him to his master with a personal plea to forgive him and make him a brother instead of a slave. That letter is called Philemon.

The Nation's Consistent Refusal

Now look at verses 17 through 23.

After three days Paul called together those who were the leading men of the Jews, and when they came together, he began saying to them, “Brethren, though I had done nothing against our people or the customs of our fathers, yet I was delivered as a prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans.

“And when they had examined me, they were willing to release me because there was no ground for putting me to death.

“But when the Jews objected, I was forced to appeal to Caesar, not that I had any accusation against my nation.

“For this reason, therefore, I requested to see you and to speak with you, for I am wearing this chain for the sake of the hope of Israel.”

They said to him, “We have neither received letters from Judea concerning you, nor have any of the brethren come here and reported or spoken anything bad about you.

“But we desire to hear from you what your views are; for concerning this sect, it is known to us that it is spoken against everywhere.”

When they had set a day for Paul, they came to him at his lodging in large numbers;

and he was explaining to them by solemnly testifying about the kingdom of God and trying to persuade them concerning Jesus, from both the Law of Moses and from the Prophets, from morning until evening.

Paul's homiletical approach consisted of:

- explaining;
- testifying;
- persuading.

Notice the result in verse 24.

Some were being persuaded by the things spoken, but others would not believe.

Paul, once again, has a divided audience in which:

- some believed;
- some refused to believe.

Ladies and gentlemen, the gospel always divides. Any time the gospel is preached, the Holy Spirit drives His plow through the hearts of the audience. Some believe; some do not – and the difference between the two is eternal heaven or eternal hell.

So, some were persuaded, but others would not believe! The word translated “persuaded” comes from the Greek word “peithos,” which indicates, “with deep emotion; with passion”. Paul passionately desired that they all believe in Christ. The results, however, were far different.

By the way, those results were not the business of Paul, nor is it the business of any Christian. The results of evangelism are the work of Christ; the responsibility of evangelizing is the work of the Christian. We leave the results to God alone, yet we accept the responsibility. And, as it was with Paul, so it will be with you – some will believe and some will not.

From a human standpoint, why would anyone believe Paul? Look at him – he is bound, under close guard, and confined to a rented flat or apartment. He does not exactly look like an ambassador from God. There is nothing about him or his message that would indicate that all of Judaism should throw off its old ways and follow this church that Paul speaks of building.

Why would anyone listen to Paul?!

Well, for one thing, looks can be deceiving. To the average person, Christianity just does not look interesting enough. It does not have a marketing

edge; it does not appeal to the senses. So, people turn up their noses, like these Jewish leaders, and simply walk away.

I received an interesting story via e-mail from one of the men in our church. It is about the President of Harvard who in 1884, made a mistake – and it cost him dearly.

A lady in a faded gingham dress and her husband, dressed in his homemade threadbare suit, stepped off the train in Boston and walked quietly, without an appointment, into the president's outer office. The secretary could tell in a moment that they did not belong in Boston, much less Cambridge. “We want to see the president,” the man said softly.

They were told to have a seat, and then they were ignored for several hours, in hopes that they would become discouraged and go away. Finally, the President decided to see them for just a moment. Obviously, someone of his importance did not have the time to spend with them. So, he walked toward the couple and then waited for them to speak first. The lady spoke up, “We had a son that attended Harvard for one year. He loved Harvard and was happy here. But about a year ago, he was accidentally killed. My husband and I would like to erect a memorial to him, somewhere on campus.”

The president was not touched and replied, “Madam, we can't put up a statue for every person who attended Harvard and died! If we did, this place would look like a cemetery!”

“Oh, no,” the lady explained quickly, “we don't want to erect a statue. We thought we would give a new building to Harvard.”

The President was shocked. He glanced at the gingham dress and the homespun suit, then exclaimed, “A building! Do you have any earthly idea how much a building costs? We have over seven and a half million dollars in the buildings alone at Harvard!”

For a moment the couple was silent. The President was pleased; he could get rid of them now.

Then the lady turned to her husband and said quietly, “If that's all it costs to build a university, why don't we just start our own?”

He nodded in agreement. Then, as the President of Harvard wilted in confusion and bewilderment, Mr. and Mrs. Leland Stanford walked out.

They jointly founded Stanford University and endowed it as a memorial to their son, Leland

Stanford, Jr. It was chartered the following year of 1885, and opened its doors a few years later.

So, Paul left the proud leaders of Judaism. They were not impressed by this apostle in chains. As a result, Paul will, so to speak, go across town and build the church among the Gentile believers.

The Apostle's Closing Rebuke

Now, the difference between the Stanford's and Paul is that they, according to history, left that office quietly, while Paul has a few things to say. Let us look at the apostle's closing rebuke.

Instead of retreating, Paul delivered a rebuke

1. Instead of retreating, Paul delivered a rebuke.

Look at verses 25 through 27.

And when they did not agree with one another, they began leaving after Paul had spoken one parting word, "The Holy Spirit rightly spoke through Isaiah the prophet to your fathers,

"saying, 'Go to this people and say, 'You will keep on hearing, but will not understand; and you will keep on seeing, but will not perceive;

"'For the heart of this people has become dull, and with their ears they scarcely hear, and they have closed their eyes; otherwise they might see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart and return, and I would heal them.'"

Instead of softening his message, Paul delivered a verdict

2. Instead of softening his message, Paul delivered a verdict.

Look at verses 28 and 29.

"Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will also listen." [When he had spoken these words, the Jews departed, having a great dispute among themselves.]

Do not think it was easy for Paul to deliver this rebuke. He said in Romans, chapter 9, verse 3,

For I could wish that I myself were accursed . . . for the sake of my brethren . . .

He desired nothing more than for his people to accept Christ. Did he assume that God had closed the door of Rome? Did he complain and say, "Lord, these chains were not my idea; this is not how you effectively reach an empire!"

I do not think so. In spite of his limitations, he grasped every opportunity.

One modern day model is Joni Eareckson Tada. After a diving accident left her paralyzed from the neck down, she struggled over her limitations; her chains.

She writes,

Can God still use me, paralyzed? Can I, paralyzed, still worship God and love Him? He has taught me that I can. Maybe God's gift to me is my dependence on Him. I will never reach the place where I'm self-sufficient; where God is crowded out of my life. I'm fully aware of His grace to me every moment of my life.

Joni Eareckson Tada now speaks, and writes, and paints by holding a brush between her teeth.

Has God hidden you away in some apartment, some obscure place far from where you dreamed He would take you? You have learned to rush – is He now teaching you how to wait?

What are your limitations? Better yet, what are you making of them? Just what are your unique opportunities?

I encourage you, sometime over the next few days, to pick up your Bible and read Ephesians or Colossians or Philippians or Philemon with one thought in mind. Think of the fact that Paul wrote these while under house arrest; while unable to fulfill his heart's desires, and God gave him a pen instead of a pulpit. Yet, as the history of the church would unfold, we discover that Paul was fully able to fulfill the desires of God's heart. And in the final chapter of anyone's life, that is the only thing that really matters.

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