

PAUL IN ROME

Acts 28:11-31

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God had revealed to Paul, a long time before Paul arrived in Rome, that he was in fact going to make it to Rome. That revelation to Paul had come in the night...as recorded back in Acts 23...let's turn to it...

Acts 23:11

It doesn't tell us **exactly how** God revealed this truth to Paul. Was it in a vision, or a dream? When one opens the New Testament scriptures to the book of Matthew, some 5 times, in Matthew chapter 2, we learn of God directing Joseph or the wise men, at the time of Christ's birth, **through dreams**.

Indeed, DREAMS are, in the Bible, often portrayed as a means for God to direct people. In Joel chapter 2, God promised that a day was coming when he would pour out his spirit on all flesh and the "old men shall dream dreams while the young men shall see visions."

Based upon that verse I think I've been OLD for a very long time for I have had plenty of very explicit dreams since the time I was quite young!

But we should seek God's leading in our lives...his direction. And if dreams are a means for that insight or direction then so be it. How well I recall one professor, back at Westminster Theological Seminary saying we should pray that God would grant us "good dreams" when we go to sleep at night. As I have pondered how writing might become a large part of my life in the next number of year I have been praying now for many, many months that God might reveal to me a story not yet written that I might write.

Well, God affirmed to Paul, be it in a vision or a dream, one night, that he would in fact someday arrive in Rome and there give a defense of his faith in Christ. And that is exactly what finally happened. Between the time of that revelation to Paul and it actually taking place, a lot of trials came Paul's way.

But here we find him finally making it...to Rome...and not just to Rome, but to Rome so as to appear before Caesar!

Now there are many things that we might say about this final chapter. My intent this morning is to basically wrap up our study of the book of Acts and then, next Sunday, pick out **a few highlights** from the book. The Sunday following that is our annual picnic at the Manheim Township Park in Neffsville. And the Sunday following that – on June 13 - we will, Lord willing, start in on a series on marriage.

But as one looks at this final chapter of Acts here are some things that strike me...

1. The judicial system has definitely changed from ancient times. On the one hand the judicial system long ago was extremely cruel and unbending. Human life was far more expendable than it is today. Only the unborn were much safer long ago than they are today. Our Lord Jesus was, of course, the recipient of that cruel end of Roman justice.

But on the other hand here is Paul and one gets the impression that he is as much in charge **over his guards** as his guards are in charge over him!

- Back when he was on the ship sailing from Crete, it was Paul who initially warned the Roman centurion, along with the ship's pilot and owner, about the ills they would face on that journey. And when what he predicted came to be true, it was **Paul who rallied those on board**, prayed over some food and told them to eat. The Roman guards didn't tell the people when to eat, Paul did.
- Then here in chapter 28, we get the sense (from verse 16) that although at least one Roman soldier was always with him, Paul is given tremendous liberty.
 - For example, when they arrive in Puteoli, we learn that because there were some Christian brothers there, they all stayed with them for seven days...and that included however many Romans were with Paul, Luke and Aristarchus.
 - Then once in Rome, we find that Paul is allowed to stay by himself, along with his Roman guard and that for two whole years, he can welcome any and all who want to visit him.

The point is: **this hardly sounds like prison. This hardly sounds like someone under arrest.** Paul had known prison. Paul had known beatings and then prison. But this was quite unlike that.

Our current system of "innocent until proven guilty" must certainly have its roots in Roman as well as Jewish Mosaic Law. But one cannot help but be glad for Paul even if, according to tradition, in the end, Paul would be beheaded by the Roman government.

2. Paul's calling of the Jewish leaders together to meet him and hear his story (verses 17 and following) is interesting.

In his Sermon on the Mount Jesus said,

"Come to terms quickly with your accuser when you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard and you be put in prison. Truly I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny" (5:25-26)

Paul's actions here reflect what Jesus was saying, namely, TAKE THE INITIATIVE to get things settled. Don't just wait for things to happen. Instead, take the initiative.

So Paul called for the Jewish elders.

As things would be these Jewish leaders were **ignorant** of any case against Paul (which was good for Paul). But, as things would also be they **had heard** about Jesus of Nazareth, "the Way" – what they called "this sect" (v.22) for, as they went on to say, "everywhere it is spoken against."

Well, there was Paul's introduction. The word was already out about Jesus of Nazareth and those that follow him and the word "everywhere" was negative. Great!

I one time heard about a person who was living, as I recall, in an area in the Northeastern U.S., and it happened to be that in the area this person lived **just about everyone was Roman Catholic.** This person was eager to see an evangelical church

get established in the area – one that was much clearer than the Roman Catholic Church was about the finished work of Christ and how, by faith alone, Christ's work is imputed to us, given as a free gift.

"But," this person complained, "everyone is Roman Catholic."

A fellow heard this man's complaint and said, "Well think of what **the early church faced!** In Jerusalem **EVERYONE was Jewish.** But that didn't stop the apostles and others from preaching and teaching about Jesus."

That's a good point.

Well, Paul was now in Rome and there he faced both Jews and Gentiles. But these Jewish leaders let it be known that everything they had heard about Jesus and his followers was negative and being spoken against. **But that didn't stop Paul.**

And so, verse 23, "from morning till evening he expounded to them, testifying to them about the kingdom of God, and trying to convince them about Jesus from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets."

It has been some years since we were in the book of Luke...chapter 24...when Jesus, following his resurrection, declared to some men "beginning with Moses and all the Prophets" the things concerning himself (v. 27). In that same chapter it goes on to say that Jesus showed them the things about himself from the "law, the prophets and the Psalms" – that is, from the Old Testament scriptures.

It was this opening of the scriptures – quoting and referencing the Old Testament scriptures – that, following Christ's departure from these men led them to say, "Did not our hearts burn within us...while he opened to us the scriptures?"

The Law of Moses:

In the Law of Moses – the first five books of the Old Testament scriptures –

we can see how back in Genesis chapter 3 there was the prediction given to Eve that through her seed – that is, a descendent – one would rise that would "crush the head of the serpent."

Jesus, the Messiah, proved to many his authority over the serpent, the devil and his minions when he cast them out of the various people he encountered. In doing so he, in effect, "crushed the head of the serpent" in the plain sight of the people who observed him.

In the Law of Moses, Moses prophesied regarding one who would rise up and be, like himself, a prophet over the nation.

Jesus, the Messiah, showed himself to be a true prophet.

The Prophets

In the Prophets, in the book of Isaiah, we read of one that would be oppressed and afflicted...cut off out of the land of the living...one who would have his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death. By this one, Isaiah prophesied, we would be forgiven, for he would bear our iniquities, and by his stripes we would be healed. This was all about Jesus. Indeed, Isaiah chapter 53 is SO CLEARLY ABOUT JESUS that even today, many unbelieving Jews prefer to just SKIP OVER that chapter while reading the book of Isaiah.

The Psalms

And in the Psalms we learn of one whose garments would be divided, and how they would cast lots for his clothing. They would pierce his hands and side, but none of his bones would be broken.

All of this was about Jesus.

Jesus was the promised Messiah, the Savior of Israel, the sin-bearer of humanity, the "Lamb of God" that would be slain for us.

Certainly all these points and more Paul would have referenced when speaking to the Jewish leaders.

Some years ago I saw a study on the issue of Jewish

conversions to Jesus. This was over 20 years ago and I'm sure the statistics have likely changed, one way or another since that time, but at that time **17% of all Jews, worldwide, called themselves followers of Jesus.**

Granted that means that 83% of all Jews reject him. But you can bet **that 17% know EXACTLY why they believe in Jesus** in a way that the vast bulk of Gentile believers can't even begin to explain.

3. But the message of salvation in Jesus was not and is not only for the Jews...and Paul made that clear.

As we close out the book of Acts there are a lot of unanswered questions:

- Did Paul actually ever appear before Caesar, and, if so, what happened?
- History suggests that Paul may have later gone to Spain and that later yet he was beheaded. How did all that occur?
- A letter like 2 Timothy has Paul writing as if he is close to death. Was that written while Paul was in Rome, under house arrest? Or was that written during a later arrest?

None of these questions can be answered definitively. The strongest tradition is that Paul, following those final two years mentioned here at the end of Acts 28, was subsequently arrested again, while Nero was emperor, and that it was during Nero's rather fanatical reign, around 67 A.D. that Paul was beheaded. But we can't say for sure.

So while there are some unanswered questions, one thing is extremely clear and that is that Paul was convinced that the gospel of Jesus Christ was intended not only for the Jews but also for the Gentiles.

And so Acts 28 ends on that theme: that whether or not the Jews believe, there were and are plenty of Gentiles that are very open to believing.

Indeed, as Paul here notes, quoting from Isaiah chapter 6, the blindness and deafness of the Jewish people to the good news of Jesus Christ appears to have been in God's plan for a long time.

Now I want to show you two interesting related Bible passages...

Matthew 13:19-17

Here Jesus quotes from the exact same passage as Paul later quotes from – Isaiah 6:10 – a passage that certainly seems to be implying that sometimes God speaks in ways that are actually MEANT to be difficult to understand. And the reason for that is that he, meaning God, does not actually INTEND for everyone to understand.

And so in this Matthew 13 passage Jesus quotes from Isaiah 6 as if to say, "I am speaking in parables – hard to understand stories at times - for exactly the reason that I do not WANT everyone to understand what is being said.

You may say, "Well that certainly doesn't fit with MY understanding that God WANTS everyone to not only hear the gospel but to understand the gospel and even to be saved." And I would say, "That is correct: that would NOT fit with your understanding.

And so the question has to be raised: is it possible your understanding is incorrect? Or is it rather that Isaiah, Jesus and Paul all had it wrong?

Isaiah 44:18

Here, although Isaiah is dealing with a different subject (this time he is addressing people's foolishness in making idols out of wood cut from a tree). But what is he here saying? He is saying that it is GOD who has shut the eyes and ears of some people so that they do not understand basic spiritual truths.

And that is what Paul is saying here in Acts 28.

Verse 25 is interesting in that it suggests that it was AFTER Paul made this final statement (in this case, verses 26-29) that the Jewish leaders "departed." They were, in a sense, listening to Paul, and some were even agreeing with Paul, but after he made that final statement (verses 26-29), quoting from Isaiah to suggest that it was GOD who was closing the hearts of some and that that was to be expected...it was AFTER THAT that they departed...they left off hearing Paul.

Paul would remain for a couple more years talking to whoever might come his way and sit with him. But as for the Jewish leaders, by and large they had had enough.

And so, even as Paul had argued years earlier when he wrote the book of Romans, God was using the HARDENING of the hearts of the Jews so as to open a door to the Gentiles. God was "cutting off" the natural branches so that the wild branches of the formerly godless Gentiles might be GRAFTED IN.

And what was true 2,000 years ago continues to be the case down to our own day. This is, from a Biblical perspective, the "age of the Gentiles." This is the age in which God's attention has turned away from the Jews being at the heart of his work to him concentrating on Gentiles and seeing THEM come to be saved.

And that, most likely, included you even as it included me.

The same message that was preached to the Jews (repent and believe the gospel) is now going out to non-Jews: to Greeks, and Romans, to Hispanics and Asians, to Americans and Africans. ONE message for the entire world: ONE message of salvation to all whom the Lord has called.

And that is a message, that as it says in the very last verse of Acts, Paul continued to preach with BOLDNESS and WITHOUT HINDRANCE.

And that is our message today...a message I hope you believe.