

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

PAUL'S TRIP TO ROME: A PHYSICAL AND SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

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## INTRODUCTION

As we look back two thousand years to the growth and spread of the church, it can be easily argued that Paul was the greatest reason (next to Jesus) for its immense growth and influence throughout the Roman Empire in the first century. Paul was introduced to readers of the Bible as the man who facilitated the stoning of Stephen and persecuted Christians throughout Israel and beyond. Who knew that he would be God's vessel to reach the Gentiles?

After his conversion, Paul goes through many trials and embarks upon many journeys to spread the gospel across the globe. While on his third missionary journey around the Mediterranean, Paul feels the Spirit's leading on his life to go and minister to Rome, after going to Jerusalem. This is where Paul's journey to Rome begins. From this point on, one can note the many ways that God leads him to Rome. In many ways, this journey was not about getting Paul to Rome, but it was to develop him into a bold leader through the troubles and situations he faced along the way.

## FOUNDATION

Paul's journey to Rome begins in Ephesus. Acts 19:21 states "Now after these things had been accomplished, Paul resolved in the Spirit to go through Macedonia and Achaia, and then to go on to Jerusalem. He said, 'After I have gone there, I must also see Rome.'" (NRSV) This is the first mention of Paul making plans to go to the city of Rome within the book of Acts. Interestingly enough, it was not Paul's plan originally. "Resolved" comes from the Greek "ἔθετο" which is generally used to mean "put" or "appointed"; this is not normal voluntary

language.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, Paul's word for "must" is "δεῖ", which means "it is necessary" and is also derived from "δέω" (to tie, bind, or imprisoned).<sup>2</sup> According to Alexander Maclaren, it is easy to see the reluctance within Paul:

"Paul's long residence in Ephesus indicates the importance of the position. The great wealthy city was the best possible centre for evangelising all the province of Asia, and that was to a large extent effected during the Apostle's stay there. [...] Paul had his plan, and God had His, and Paul's was not realised in the fashion he had meant, but it was realised in substance."<sup>3</sup>

One chapter later, we find that Paul is "eager" to be in Jerusalem and "if possible, on the day of Pentecost." (Acts 20:16 NRSV) Seemingly contrary to Acts 19:21, Paul wants to get to Jerusalem as soon as possible. Some would say that he has accepted his fate at this point to enter Jerusalem and wants to expedite this journey. Others disagree with this view. J. W. McGarvey in his commentary on Acts states "The day of Pentecost, however, furnished the only occasion which he could expect before fall, on which the Jews would be generally congregated in Jerusalem, and he desired to be there to distribute the contributions for the poor without visiting the rural districts individually for that purpose."<sup>4</sup> This is supported by Paul's words in Romans 15:22-29. Paul simply wanted to make the most of the situation by being able to distribute resources to the poor. We find in verses 22-23 Paul's deep sorrow and pain at the thought of going to Jerusalem. "And now, as a captive to the Spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and persecutions are waiting for me." (Acts 20:22-23)

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<sup>1</sup> Robert L. Thomas. *New American Standard Hebrew-Aramaic and Greek Dictionaries: Updated Edition*, G5087, G5088. Anaheim: Foundation Publications, Inc., 1998.

<sup>2</sup> Robert L. Thomas. *New American Standard Hebrew-Aramaic and Greek Dictionaries: Updated Edition*, G5087, G5088. Anaheim: Foundation Publications, Inc., 1998.

<sup>3</sup> Alexander Maclaren. *Exposition of Holy Scriptures: Acts*. BiblioLife, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> J. W. McGarvey. *A Commentary on Acts of Apostles*, p 250. Lexington, KY: Transylvania Printing and Publishing Co, 1872.

While this paints a bleak picture for Paul's future, he finishes his statement with "But I do not count my life of any value to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the good news of God's grace." (Acts 20:24) Although he knew of the pain that awaited him, he reaffirms his devotion to the Lord and had faith that God would provide. Up until this point, he knew that he "must see Rome" but had not had any direct revelation or confirmation that it would become a reality. Despite all the warnings of suffering (Acts 20:36-38, 21:10-14), Paul was surrendered to God's will for Jerusalem and beyond. Each time after being cautioned, Paul took the opportunity to reiterate his faith and to be an example to the believers present.

#### **CONTINUED PREPARATIONS**

Less than one week after arriving in Jerusalem, Paul is seized by the Jews and beaten before being rescued by the Roman soldiers. Paul remained in Roman custody for a minimum of the following two years. While he was under their care and protection, he continued to face trials (literally) and tribulations and through those he grew in boldness and faith. Also during this period, Paul receives an affirmation from God as to his ministry in Rome.

After Paul's first trial before the Jewish council, having nearly been torn apart by a dispute he started between the Pharisee's and Sadducees, Paul was removed by the Roman tribune back into Roman custody. After such an unproductive and violent council with the Jewish leaders, it would have been easy for Paul to become discouraged, considering everything else that Paul had gone through recently. McGarvey states:

"It is not to be presumed that this personal appearance of the Lord to encourage him occurred when it was not needed, or when encouragement could be supplied in an ordinary way. It is quite certain, therefore, that Paul's spirit was greatly burdened that night. The long-dreaded bonds and afflictions, which had hung like a dark cloud before him on his journey from Corinth to Jerusalem, had now at least fallen upon him. [...] But just at the proper moment to save him

from despair, the solemn assurance is give, that his long-continued prayers would yet be answered, and he should preach the Word in Rome as he had done in Jerusalem.”<sup>5</sup>

While Paul did gain this reassurance, things in Jerusalem did not immediately brighten for him. In Acts 23:12-35, we discover there is a plot by a group of Jewish men to murder Paul. The plot was discovered and Paul was then moved to Caesarea, actually aiding Paul’s trip toward Rome by placing him in front of a Roman council versus a Jewish one. Over the next three chapters (Acts 24-26), Paul stands before three separate councils. After God’s words of encouragement, it can hardly be seen any hesitation or apprehension within Paul as he stands before these councils. He becomes bolder in his preaching; he knows there is nothing that can prevent him from going to Rome. He is so filled with courage that he, at one point, even uses his defense statement in court as a chance to offer salvation to the Gentiles present (Acts 26:29).

During one of these trials, Paul appeals his case to Caesar. This would have been the first viewing of the case by Festus, the new governor of Caesarea. After Festus had suggested for Paul to go to Jerusalem to be tried by the Jews, Paul says “I am appealing to the emperor’s tribunal; this is where I should be tried. I have done no wrong to the Jews, as you very well know. [...] I appeal to the emperor.” (Acts 25:10-11)

### **THE JOURNEY TO ROME**

Starting in Acts 27, Paul’s physical journey to Rome begins. This journey was probably not what Paul had envisioned for a cruise to the capitol of the world. Here there were more trails and hardships. However, with each of these, he continued to minister. By the end of this passage, we see a man (who was apprehensive about entering Jerusalem) that had completely died to self and cared for everyone around him. He had developed so far from Acts 19:21 yet still had so far

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<sup>5</sup>J. W. McGarvey. *A Commentary on Acts of Apostles*, p 268. Lexington, KY: Transylvania Printing and Publishing Co, 1872.

to go on his way to Rome. The journey there was just another way that God showed that he was watching out for Paul.

The story of Paul's journey by boat is actually quite remarkable. "There is no such detailed record of the working of an ancient ship in the whole of classical literature."<sup>6</sup> James Boice, in his "Acts: An Expository Commentary", notes that "Luke's words are accurate in terms of the route the ship took, ancient navigating skills, details of the ship's physical construction, and the way in which the sailors tried to cope with the storm."<sup>7</sup> Maclaren also makes note of this.<sup>8</sup> It is clear that the author of Acts accompanied Paul on this journey due to the "we" statements found throughout Acts 27 and 28.

Even though Paul is transferred to the care of a new centurion, named Julius, his faith and boldness are not deferred. He still preaches and takes charge in certain situations. When decisions came regarding the destination for nesting for the winter, Paul advises them, although he was ignored. It was rare in those days for a centurion and sailor to take heed to a land-based evangelist regarding the matters of weather and the seas. However, once a violent storm arose and raged for fourteen days, just about everyone was despairing and giving up hope of surviving the storm. On the thirteenth night of the tsunami-like force, Paul receives word from an angel: "Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before the emperor; and indeed, God has granted safety to all those who are sailing with you." (Acts 27:24)

The storm had not managed to beat or wash the hope, courage, and faith in God out of Paul and he urges the crew on. "I urge you now to keep up your courage, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. [...] So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in

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<sup>6</sup> Thomas Walker, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p 543. Chicago, IL: Moody, 1965.

<sup>7</sup> James Montgomery Boice. *Acts: An Expository Commentary*, p 410. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1997.

<sup>8</sup> Alexander Maclaren. *Exposition of Holy Scriptures: Acts*. BiblioLife, 2008.

God that it will be exactly as I have been told. But we will have to run aground on some island.” (Acts 27:22, 25-26) Sure enough, the next night, the ship came within landing distance of land. Once again, Paul encourages everyone onboard, breaking bread and giving thanks to God.

The following day, the crew made way for land. After hitting a reef just off the beach, the ship broke apart; everyone on board made it to shore safely, a true miracle for shipwrecks of that time. Once ashore the island of Malta, there were challenges to be faced. For when Paul was bitten by the viper in the hand, everyone expected him to die shortly. However, Paul clung to God and had such faith in Him that he knew that God would not let him get this far only to die by from a snake bite. According to the Easton Bible Dictionary, “The viper mentioned in Acts 28:3 was probably the *vipera aspis*, or the Mediterranean viper.”, which was apparently a deadly and feared snake in the region.<sup>9</sup> Currently, however, there are no vipers on the Island of Malta due to deforestation and the growing population so there is not much information on it. Regardless, in an instance where Paul should have died (or at least grown gravely sick), there was no ill-effect upon him.

Acts 28 is split into two parts: The first half of this chapter is Paul and his entourage "island-hopping" to get to Rome and the second retells his story once he arrives. From the time of the shipwreck through his departure from the island took three to four months. However, after boarding an Alexandrian ship that wintered on the island, the entourage proceeded toward Rome.

Once they arrived in Puteoli, they stayed with the believers there for seven days before moving forward to Rome. While they were there, word went ahead of them that Paul had arrived in Rome. Believers from all around came to see and hear him. Acts 28:15 documents that some “came from as far as the Forum of Appius and Three Taverns to meet us.” (NRSV) In the “Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible”, the authors note that the Forum of

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<sup>9</sup> M. G. Easton. *Easton's Bible Dictionary*. Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1996.



Appius was located nearly 41 miles from Rome and that Three Taverns was nearly 30 miles in distance. For people to travel that distance back then would have been a two or three day journey minimum.

### **ONCE IN ROME**

“Paul thanked God and took courage” (Acts 28:15). No matter where Paul was at, he never forgot God and all that he owed to his Lord. Alexander Maclaren states it perfectly when he concludes his commentary of Acts:

“It had long been Paul's dream to see Rome.' How little he knew the steps by which his dream was to be fulfilled! He told the Ephesian elders that he was going up to Jerusalem under compulsion of the Spirit, and not knowing the things that should befall him there,' except that he was certain of bonds and imprisonment.' He did not know that these were God's way of bringing him to Rome. Jewish fury, Roman statecraft and law-abidingness, two years of a prison, a stormy voyage, a shipwreck, led him to his long-wished-for goal. God uses even man's malice and opposition to the Gospel to advance the progress of the Gospel.”<sup>10</sup>

Now that Paul was within the walls of Rome and at the center of the world, he went ahead “preaching the kingdom of God and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness, unhindered.” (Acts 28:30-31 NASB) The King James Version has verse 31 was “...with all confidence, no man forbidding him”. This is the only time in the New Testament that “unhindered” is used in this sense, literally the direct opposite of κωλύω (which means, hinder, forbid, or prevent). “Openness” (παρρησίας in Greek) finds its foundation in πᾶς (all) and ῥῆσις (speech). Together it means freedom of speech or confidence<sup>11</sup>. While Paul was under house arrest, it seemed as though Paul was not bound in any way. He preached and taught freely while

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<sup>10</sup> Alexander Maclaren. *Exposition of Holy Scriptures: Acts*. BiblioLife, 2008.

<sup>11</sup> Robert L. Thomas. *New American Standard Hebrew-Aramaic and Greek Dictionaries: Updated Edition*, G3954, G3955. Anaheim: Foundation Publications, Inc., 1998.

having many visitors come to listen to him. He was a man who had transformed into someone who was unstoppable and entirely devout to the Lord.

#### APPLICATION

The book of Acts is primarily about the works of the apostles and the growth of the church. Not only is the book about overall growth, but it is also focused on the personal development that occurs within believers who put their faith and trust in Christ. We see this in Paul. What can current believers take from this journey that Paul takes, physically and spiritually? His accomplishments on this journey can be classified in three categories: personal, outward, and church development. Each of these we see can find some key points (although it is possible to collect so much more from Paul, his life, and his example).

The first, and probably the largest, is Paul's personal journey. He shifts from a man simply following God's direction in his life into someone who is boldly preaching, without hindrance, in the most powerful city in the ancient world, knowing that there is nothing that can separate him from God. It is slightly highlighted in the paragraphs above with the Greek words that are emphasized at the beginning of his journey. He started out being "ἔθετο" (put or appointed) to his journey but by the end he was filled with confidence (παρρησίας) and power in the Lord. Within Paul's trip by sea and the violent storm, we see a finalization within Paul that he knew something greater was watching out for him. Boice takes down four points that perfectly show the realization Paul had aboard this boat:<sup>12</sup>

1. **Paul knew God was with him:** Paul had previously known that God was with him; this is probably a concept that he grew up hearing. However, he probably never experienced it. Within this instance, Paul saw God's hand move despite the storm and

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<sup>12</sup> James Montgomery Boice. *Acts: An Expository Commentary*, pp. 412–414. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1997.

- waves crashing around him. With the angel spoke to him on the boat, he firmly knew that God was with him (Acts 27:24).
2. **Paul knew he belonged to God:** in Acts 27:23 Paul says "...the God to whom I belong..." This shows that he knew that he was not his own person but was held by someone else. It would have been the same sense of belonging that a son feels when his father stands over him, there to protect and guide him when things go beyond the understanding of the youngling.
  3. **Paul was in the Lord's Service:** Following the statement about belonging is "...whom I serve..." (also in Acts 27:23). He, not only knew that he was held by God, but that he was under Him. "God had told him what he was to do: He was to bear witness in Rome. But he had not gotten to Rome yet [...] If God had told him that he was going to serve him in Rome [...] if he had not yet gotten to Rome, then [...] God was going to preserve him."<sup>13</sup>
  4. **Paul trusted God in all circumstances:** "for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told" (Acts 27:25). At this point, Paul can look back and see how God shaped him, rescued him from the Jews, guided him through trial after trial, and would save him and the others from this torrential storm. At this point, nothing could faze him, not even being bit by a poisonous viper (Acts 28:3-6).

Christians today can learn from his example and recognize these four things in their own lives: God *is* with them, they *belong* to God, they *are not* their own, and they can trust him through anything. It can also be observed in Paul's ministry that, while he knew he was leaving,

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<sup>13</sup> James Montgomery Boice. *Acts: An Expository Commentary*, p 413. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1997.

he took time to prepare those around him for his absence. This is primarily seen in Acts 20 and 28.

1. **Paul lived as an example and commissioned others to do the same:** Acts 20:17-38 recounts his meeting with the leaders from Ephesus. He begins by speaking of how he lived his life “serving the Lord with all humility and with tears, enduring the trials that came to me through the plots of the Jews” and that he was going forward to Jerusalem to whatever awaits him there (regardless of the pain that was foreseen). He then commissions the leader's service to God: “And now I commend you to God and to the message of his grace, a message that is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all who are sanctified.” (Acts 20:32)
2. **Paul dedicated his life to mentoring and teaching all:** Nearing the end of his ministry, he did not fail at preparing those around him. While Acts 28 is not known for expounding upon Paul’s ministry and outreach, it highlights three things: he “was **welcoming all** who came to him, **preaching** the kingdom of God and **teaching** concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness, unhindered.” (Acts 28:31) Nothing prevented people from coming to him. Nothing censored his preaching to the masses. Nothing halted the teaching of doctrine and theology to those curious.

He grew himself, he grew others, and finally, he grew the church. There was never a moment when he did not take advantage of his position to build the body of Christ. This is evident in two primary ways:

1. **Paul was always reaching out:** he would always seize the moment to minister to someone. Whether he was in front of an angry mob (Acts 21:27-22:21) or in court (Acts 26:29), whether he was in the midst of a violent storm (Acts 27:22-26) or in a

new land (Acts 28:7-10), Paul never failed to act or make an effort to share what God had done in his life.

2. **Paul was always perfecting:** He wrote letters. It sounds simple but as he traveled, he wrote to the churches in cities addressing issues or commending them for certain actions. Easton's Bible Dictionary notes that while Paul was in Rome, he "wrote his epistles to the Philippians, to the Ephesians, to the Colossians, to Philemon, and probably also to the Hebrews."<sup>14</sup> He focused on perfecting the body and making it presentable in God's sight as the bride of Christ.

In Matthew Henry's "Concise Commentary on the Bible", the book of Acts closes out with these sentences:

"Let us seek to live more and more in the love of the Saviour; to labour to glorify Him by every action of our lives; and we shall assuredly, by his strength, be among the number of those who now overcome our enemies; and by his free grace and mercy, be hereafter among the blessed company who shall sit with Him upon his throne, even as He also has overcome, and is sitting on his Father's throne, at God's right hand for evermore."<sup>15</sup>

This largely sums up what current Christians should strive for and what we can learn from Paul's life. There is application that can be seen in the example that Paul lead and shared with the world.

## CONCLUSION

From Acts 19:21 to Acts 28:31, there is a remarkable transformation in the life of Paul. His journey to Rome is not simply one of travel but of a mindset and relationship with Christ that developed over many years and many trials. Paul held to his faith and commitment to Jesus, regardless of the circumstances around him, and lived a model life of one that belonged 100% to

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<sup>14</sup> M. G. Easton *Easton's Bible Dictionary*. Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1996.

<sup>15</sup> Matthew Henry and Thomas Scott. *Matthew Henry's Concise Commentary*, Ac 28:23. Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1997.

Christ. Once he was in Rome, he was an unquenchable stream of testimony to the Lord's great and mighty works that poured out to anyone willing to come. His story started like many do: with the foundation laid for something powerful to happen. Paul did not know what was ahead of him in Jerusalem and could have never completely foreseen or understood God's plan for him to reach Rome and minister there.

God continued to polish Paul and prepare him for the trials that were to be ahead of him. Paul withstood three examinations by three separate courts and with each one became bolder and more confident that God was in charge. Once the physical journey took place from Caesarea to Rome, there were more adversities to be faced but Paul grew through them. By the time the voyage was complete, he was a man completely loyal to God and completely dead to self. Once he arrived in Rome, he gave everything to reaching out to all and to teach all he knew to further the kingdom.

Ultimately, all this knowledge of Paul's life is useless unless we take away some application that can be applied to the modern life. While Paul faced trials that could only be faced during that time and culture, there are many things in the modern world that push against the kingdom. While the cultures are different, the concepts that Paul applied to his life can be easily applied to the modern Christian's life. Know that God is always present. Know that all belongs to God. Know that the Christian lifestyle is one of service to God. Know that God is trustable with all things. Live as an example of a Christ-led life. Be dedicated to developing others. Always reach out to the needy. Always focus on perfecting the body of Christ and living in unity with others. This is what Paul's life in Christ exemplified by the end of his journey to Rome.

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