

6. The gospel for Jews and Gentiles (28:17–31)

a. Paul addresses Jews (28:17–23)

In accordance with his principle that the gospel is God's power for salvation 'first for the Jew, then for the Gentile',⁴⁵ even in the Gentile capital of the world Paul addressed himself to Jews first. Three days after his arrival (he gave himself no longer to recover from his arduous journey) he summoned the Jewish leaders to meet him. He emphasized three points. First, he had himself done nothing against the Jewish people ('our people', he called them) or their ancestral customs ('our customs', he said). Secondly, after being arrested and handed over to the Romans (17), and examined by them, they had wanted to set him free because they could find nothing against him deserving death (18). Thirdly, it was because the Jews had objected to his release that he had felt compelled to appeal to Caesar, although he had nothing against his own people (19). Thus, Paul had done nothing against the Jews, the Romans had nothing against him, and he had nothing (*i.e.* no charge) against the Jews. It was in order to clarify these points that he had asked to see them. He was in every way a loyal Jew; indeed it was because of the hope of Israel, Israel's Messianic expectation fulfilled in Jesus, that he was a prisoner (20).

In reply, the Jewish leaders declared, surprisingly enough, both that no official letters about him had reached them from Judea and that no visiting Jews had said anything bad about him (21). They wanted to learn more about his views, however, because they knew that the Nazarene 'sect' was everywhere spoken against (22).

On the appointed day the Jews assembled in Paul's lodgings in even greater numbers. Then all day long, from morning till evening, Paul concentrated on two things. First, he unfolded by explanation and testimony the character and coming of God's kingdom (did he contrast it with Caesar's?), and secondly he tried to convince them about Jesus out of the Scriptures (23). This is likely to mean, as on previous occasions when he addressed Jewish people, that Paul argued for the necessary identification of the historical Jesus with the biblical Christ.

b. Paul turns to the Gentiles (28:24–28)

Paul's day-long persuasive exposition split his audience in two, as so many times previ-

⁴⁵ Rom. 1:16.

ously. some were convinced by his reasoning; others ‘remained sceptical’ (NEB) or, since a deliberate intention seems to be indicated, ‘refused to believe’ (24). In other words, they were deeply divided among themselves and began to go home—but only after Paul’s summing-up, whose note of solemn finality no-one could miss. He boldly applied to them words which the Holy spirit had spoken to their forefathers in Isaiah’s day,⁴⁶ and which Jesus had quoted of his unbelieving contemporaries,⁴⁷ as also had John.⁴⁸ This quotation draws a distinction between hearing and understanding, seeing and perceiving (26), and goes on to attribute people’s non-comprehension to their deliberately hard hearts, deaf ears and closed eyes, for otherwise they might see, hear, understand, turn and be saved (27). ‘In this fearful process’, wrote J. A. Alexander, ‘there are three distinguishable agencies expressly or implicitly described, the ministerial agency of the prophet, the judicial agency of God, and the suicidal agency of the people themselves.’ In other words, if we ask why people do not understand and turn to God, their unbelief could be attributed (in fact, is attributed in Scripture) now to the evangelist’s preaching, now to the judgment of God, and now to the obstinacy of the people. Alexander goes on to point out that in the Isaiah verses the first of these is the most prominent, in John 12:40 the second, and in the Matthew and Mark passages, as here in Acts 28, the third.⁴⁹ Although our mind finds it hard to reconcile these perspectives with each other, since it is difficult to ascribe the same situation to three agencies simultaneously, yet all three are true and must be held fast with equal tenacity.

Because of the Jews’ deliberate rejection of the gospel, Paul wants them to know that God’s salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and that they will listen with open ears, whereas the Jews have closed theirs. Three times before, stubborn Jewish opposition has led Paul to turn to the Gentiles—in Pisidian Antioch (13:46), in Corinth (18:6), and in Ephesus (19:8–9). Now for the fourth time, in the world’s capital city, and in a yet more decisive manner, he does it again (28). Verse 29 belongs to the Western text and says that the Jews then left, ‘arguing hotly between themselves’.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Is. 6:9–10.

⁴⁷ Mt. 13:14–15; Mk. 4:11–12.

⁴⁸ Jn. 12:37ff.

⁴⁹ Alexander, II, p. 493.

⁵⁰ JB, verse 29, note i.

c. Paul welcomes all who visit him (28:30–31)

In these last two verses of the Acts there is no mention of either Jews or Gentiles, as there has been in the previous paragraphs. The most natural explanation of this is that the ‘all’ who came to see Paul included both. The terrible verses from [Isaiah 6](#) meant neither that no Jews were converted, nor that those Jews who believed would be rejected. Nevertheless, the emphasis of Luke’s conclusion is on the Gentiles who came to Paul, who were symbols and precursors of the vast, hungry Gentile world outside. *They will listen!* Paul had predicted ([29](#)). And listen they did. For two whole years they came to him and listened to him, as he stayed on in Rome, in his own rented accommodation, or ‘at his own expense’ ([RSV](#), [NEB](#)). Probably he resumed his tent-making, in order to pay his way. But when visitors came to see him, he laid aside his manual labour for evangelism. And what did he talk to them about? He again spoke about ‘the kingdom of God’ and ‘the [Lord Jesus Christ](#)’ (as in verse [23](#)), especially in relation to each other. He ‘preached’ the former and ‘taught’ the latter, Luke says. This seems to mean that he proclaimed the good news of the breaking into human history of God’s gracious rule through Christ and that he linked this with ‘the facts about the [Lord Jesus Christ](#)’ ([NEB](#)), which he also taught, the facts of his birth and life, words and works, death and resurrection, exaltation and gift of the Spirit. It was through these saving events that the kingdom of God had dawned. Probably, however, the distinction between ‘preaching’ and ‘teaching’ has been over-pressed, for all Paul’s preaching had a doctrinal content, while all his teaching had an evangelistic purpose.

The final words of the book (which the [NIV](#) misplaces) are the adverbial expression *meta pasēs parrēsias*, ‘with all boldness’, and the adverb *akōlutōs*, ‘without hindrance’. *Parrēsia* has been a characteristic word of Acts ever since the Twelve exhibited boldness and prayed for more ([4:13](#), [31](#)). And Paul had asked the Ephesians to pray that his ministry might bear the same mark.⁵¹ *Parrēsia* denotes speech which is candid (with no concealment of truth), clear (with no obscurity of expression) and confident (with no fear of consequences). ‘Without hindrance’ means that, although the military surveillance continued, there was no ban by the authorities on Paul’s speaking. Though his hand was still bound, his mouth was open for [Jesus Christ](#). Though he was chained, the

⁵¹ [Eph. 6:19–20](#).

Word of God was not.⁵² Together Luke's two adverbs describe the freedom which the gospel enjoyed, having neither internal nor external restraint. In consequence, we may be sure that many were converted, including the runaway slave Onesimus.⁵³

Conclusion: The providence of God

Many readers of Acts, who have no problem with chapter 28 (Paul's arrival and ministry in Rome), find great difficulty in chapter 27 (the voyage, the storm and the shipwreck). Why on earth did Luke devote so much of his precious space to this graphic, but seemingly unedifying, story? To be sure, his reputation as an accurate chronicler is enhanced by it, and his portraiture of Paul in a crisis situation is helpful. But still the length of the narrative seems out of proportion to its value.

It is this feeling which has prompted some students to look in the story for deeper, spiritual meanings. One such was August van Ryn, who was born in the Netherlands in 1890 but became an American preacher and teacher. In his *Acts of the Apostles: The Unfinished Work of Christ*⁵⁴ he developed an elaborate allegory. The ship is the visible church, whose history has been a voyage from 'its pristine perfection' in Jerusalem at Pentecost, through 'much contrary wind and violent storms' (persecution and false doctrine) to 'its moral and spiritual wreck in Rome', that is, in the Roman Catholic Church. Those on board are a mixed multitude. Some resemble the centurion, who believed the captain and owner of the ship (church leaders) 'more than those things which were spoken by Paul', while others, even in the midst of darkness, storm and fear, listen to Paul's teaching and are saved. These also throw the wheat into the sea, casting their bread on the waters, that is, broadcasting gospel seed far and wide. The crew struggle to undergird the ship (well-meaning people who try to hold the church together by union schemes). But they cannot prevent it from being wrecked, from being broken into a thousand fragments. The allegory is far-fetched, van Ryn admitted, but added 'personally I like this far-fetchedness'. I hope my readers do not, however. Unprincipled allegorizations bring Scripture into disrepute, and cause confusion, not enlightenment.

⁵² Cf. 2 Tim. 2:9.

⁵³ Phm. 10.

⁵⁴ *Acts of the Apostles: The Unfinished Work of Christ* by August van Ryn (Loixeaux Brothers, New York, 1961).

What, then, is the major lesson we are intended to learn from [Acts 27](#) and [28](#)? If concerns the providence of God, who ‘works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will’,⁵⁵ declares that ‘no wisdom, no insight no plan ... can succeed against the Lord’,⁵⁶ and engineers even evil ‘for the good of those who love him’.⁵⁷ This providential activity of God is seen in these chapters in two complementary ways, first in bringing Paul to Rome, his desired goal, and secondly in bringing him there as a prisoner, his undesired condition. It was an unexpected combination of circumstances: what lay behind it?

First, Luke intends us to marvel with him over the safe conduct of Paul to Rome. It is not so much that Paul had said ‘I must visit Rome’ ([19:21](#)), as that Jesus had said to him ‘You must testify in Rome’ ([23:11](#)). Yet circumstance after circumstance seemed calculated to make this impossible. Paul had expressed his intention to proceed straight from Jerusalem to Rome.⁵⁸ Instead, he was arrested in Jerusalem, subjected to endless trials, imprisoned in Caesarea, threatened with assassination by the Jews, and then nearly drowned in the Mediterranean, killed by the soldiers and poisoned by a snake! Each incident seemed to be designed to prevent to him from reaching his God-planned, God-promised destination. Since Luke concentrates on the storm, we need to remember that the sea, reminiscent of the primeval chaos, was a regular Old Testament symbol of evil powers in opposition to God. It was not the forces of nature (water, wind and snake) or the machinations of men (schemes, plots and threats) which were arrayed against Paul, but demonic forces at work through them. Scripture is full of examples of the devil seeking to thwart God’s saving purpose through his people and his Christ. He tried through Pharaoh to drown the baby Moses, through Haman to annihilate the Jews, through Herod the Great to destroy the infant Jesus in Bethlehem, and through the Sanhedrin to stifle the apostolic witness and smother the church at its birth. And now through the storm at sea he attempted to stop Paul bringing his gospel to the capital of the world.

But God obstructed his purpose. Luke increases the excitement of his story by letting us into his secret, namely that Jesus had promised Paul in advance that he would reach

⁵⁵ [Eph. 1:11](#).

⁵⁶ [Pr. 21:30](#); *cf.* [Is. 8:10](#); [54:17](#).

⁵⁷ [Rom. 8:28](#); *cf.* [Gn. 50:20](#).

⁵⁸ [Rom. 15:25–29](#).

Rome (23:11). So we know from the beginning that he will get there. But as the narrative proceeds and the storm becomes ever more violent, until all hope is lost, we wonder how on earth he will be rescued. Will he make it? Yes he will! He does! For he was rescued by the divine overruling, which Luke makes clear by his repeated use of the vocabulary of ‘salvation’.⁵⁹

So by God’s providence Paul reached Rome safe and sound. But he arrived as a prisoner! Christ’s promise that he would testify in Rome had not included that information. How was this compatible with the providence of God? It seems to me legitimate to argue that the apostle, who was brought to Rome to witness, found his witness expanded, enriched and authenticated by his two-year custody in the city.

First, his witness was expanded, not only because of the constant flow of people visiting him, but especially because he witnessed to Christ in the presence of Caesar. This has, of course, been questioned. Although ‘down to the time of Nero’, Sherwin-White writes, ‘the emperors themselves heard the cases that fell under their *cognitio*’, yet in his early years ‘Nero avoided personal jurisdiction, and then only accepted a case for special reasons’. Instead, he normally delegated the trial of capital cases, even though ‘the sentences were confirmed by him afterwards’.⁶⁰ So was the case of Paul one of the exceptions? I think we should argue that it was. Leaving aside the possibility that Paul’s deliverance ‘from the lion’s mouth’ was a reference to his release by Nero,⁶¹ the strongest argument is Jesus’ promise to Paul on the ship, ‘You must stand trial before Caesar’ (27:24). If his first promise to Paul (about reaching Rome) was fulfilled, is it likely that Luke would have included his second promise (about standing before Caesar) unless he knew that it too was fulfilled? I think not. In this case we are permitted to imagine that the prisoner who stood before Felix, Festus and Agrippa, stood before Nero also, and that in the world’s most prestigious court, to the world’s most prestigious person, he faithfully proclaimed Christ. Yes, Nero himself, that artistic but blood-thirsty genius, heard the gospel from the lips of the apostle to the Gentiles. That would not have been possible if he were not a prisoner on trial.

Secondly, Paul’s witness was enriched by those two years. It is difficult for us to con-

⁵⁹ Acts 27:20, 31, 34, 43, 44; 28:1, 4.

⁶⁰ Sherwin-White, pp. 110–111.

⁶¹ 2 Tim. 4:17.

ceive how such a congenital activist as Paul managed to endure nearly five years of comparative inactivity (two in the Caesarea prison, two under house arrest in Rome, and about six months in between voyaging from Caesarea to Rome). Were they wasted years? Was he champing at the bit and pawing the ground like a restless and rebellious horse? No, his prison letters breathe an atmosphere of joy, peace, patience and contentment, because he believed in the sovereignty of God. Moreover, however much he longed to get out and serve the contemporary church, yet, as a result of his two years' partial withdrawal in Rome, he has bequeathed to posterity in his four prison letters an even richer spiritual legacy. Probably Paul neither knew nor understood this. But we do.

Of course, Paul did not write all his letters in prison. He wrote to the Galatians in the heat of theological debate on his way up to Jerusalem for the Council; he wrote both letters to the Thessalonians within weeks of his mission in their city; and he wrote to the Corinthians and Romans in the midst of a relentlessly busy ministry. So he did not find it necessary to have a spell in gaol in order to get his writing done! Nevertheless, I maintain that in God's providence there is something distinctive and special about those prison letters. It is not only that he had more time now to reflect and to pray; it is also that the substance of these letters owes something to his prison experience. He was facing trial and possible death, but knew that he had already risen with Christ. He was awaiting the emperor's pleasure, but knew that the supreme authority to whom he bowed was not the Lord Caesar, but the Lord Christ.

So then (the Holy Spirit using his custody to clarify and enforce this truth), the three main prison letters (to the Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians) set forth more powerfully than anywhere else the supreme, sovereign, undisputed and unrivalled lordship of Jesus Christ. The person and work of Christ are given cosmic proportions, for God created all things through Christ and has reconciled all things through Christ. The fullness of the Godhead, which dwelt in Christ, had also worked through him. Christ is the agent of all God's work of creation and redemption. In addition, having humbled himself to the cross, God has highly exalted him. All three prison letters say so. God has given him the name or rank above all others.⁶² All things have been put under his feet.⁶³ It is God's will that in everything he might have the supremacy.⁶⁴ Was it not through his

⁶² Phil. 2:9.

⁶³ Eph. 1:22.

very confinement that his eyes were opened to see the victory of Christ and the fullness of life, power and freedom which is given to those who belong to Christ? Paul's perspective was adjusted, his horizon extended, his vision clarified and his witness enriched by his prison experience.

Thirdly, his ministry was authenticated by his sufferings. Nothing proves the sincerity of our beliefs like our willingness to suffer for them. So Paul had to suffer, and be seen to suffer, for the gospel he was preaching. It was not only that in Isaiah the servant who brings light to the nations must suffer, that the vocations to service and to suffering are intertwined, that the witness and the martyr are one (*martys*), and that the seed which multiplies is the seed which dies.⁶⁵ It is also that Paul was suffering for 'his' gospel,⁶⁶ for the 'mystery' revealed to him that Jews and Gentiles were equal members of the body of Christ. That is why he could write of 'my sufferings for you',⁶⁷ and could describe himself as Christ's prisoner 'for the sake of you Gentiles'.⁶⁸ Paul's arrest, imprisonment and trials were all due to his uncompromising espousal of the Gentile cause. It was because of his witness to the Gentiles that the Jews rose up in such fury against him. Paul paid dearly for his loyalty to the freeness and universality of the gospel. But his appeals to the churches to live a life worthy of the gospel were all the more authentic because he was himself a prisoner on account of the gospel.⁶⁹ He was ready to die for it; they must live to adorn it.

Was Paul released after the 'two whole years' Luke mentions (30)? He clearly expected to be.⁷⁰ And the Pastoral Epistles supply evidence that he was, for he resumed his travels for about two more years before being re-arrested, re-tried, condemned and executed in AD 64. By then he could write that he had fought the good fight, finished the race and kept the faith.⁷¹ Now the next generation must step into his shoes and continue to work.

⁶⁴ Col. 1:18.

⁶⁵ Jn. 12:24.

⁶⁶ 2 Tim. 2:8–9.

⁶⁷ Eph. 3:13; Col. 1:24.

⁶⁸ Eph. 3:1; cf. Col. 4:3.

⁶⁹ E.g. Eph. 4:1; 6:19–20.

⁷⁰ Phil. 1:19–26; Phm. 22.

⁷¹ 2 Tim. 4:7.

Just as Luke's Gospel ended with the prospect of a mission to the nations,⁷² So the Acts ends with the prospect of a mission radiating from Rome to the world. Luke's description of Paul preaching 'with boldness' and 'without hindrance' symbolizes a wide open door, through which we in our day have to pass. The Acts of the Apostles have long ago finished. But the acts of the followers of Jesus will continue until the end of the world, and their words will spread to the ends of the earth.

⁷² Lk. 24:47; cf. Acts 1:8.