

Derek French:

Having been assured by the Lord that he would testify about him in Rome, Paul eventually arrived there.

As we follow the journey of this remarkable servant of God, we left him last time on the island of Malta, having been ship wrecked after a horrendous storm.

Today we trace the final part of his journey, and we'll note two very important facets of what it means to belong to Christ, and being in his service. The first is the importance and delight of loving Christian fellowship with fellow believers. And the second is the need to be ready to speak of the saviour whenever the opportunity arises.

We've the help of Gerard and Phillippa Chrispin again, and we'll be examining Acts 28 verses 11-22 which Phillippa will read to us, followed by Gerard explaining them.

Phillippa Chrispin:

*'After three months we sailed in an Alexandrian ship whose figurehead was the Twin Brothers, which had wintered at the island. And landing at Syracuse, we stayed three days. From there we circled round and reached Rhegium. And after one day the south wind blew; and the next day we came to Puteoli, where we found brethren, and were invited to stay with them seven days. And so we went toward Rome. And from there, when the brethren heard about us, they came to meet us as far as Appii Forum and Three Inns. When Paul saw them, he thanked God and took courage.*

*'Now when we came to Rome, the centurion delivered the prisoners to the captain of the guard; but Paul was permitted to dwell by himself with the soldier who guarded him.*

*'And it came to pass after three days that Paul called the leaders of the Jews together. So when they had come together, he said to them: "Men and brethren, though I have 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, who, when they had examined me, wanted to let me go, because there was no cause for putting me to death. But when the Jews spoke against it, I was compelled to appeal to Caesar, not that I had anything of which to accuse my nation. For this reason therefore I have called for you, to see you and speak with you, because for the hope of Israel I am bound with this chain."*

*'Then they said to him, "We neither received letters from Judea concerning you, nor have any of the brethren who came reported or spoken any evil of you. But we desire to hear from you what you think; for concerning this sect, we know that it is spoken against everywhere."*

Gerard Chrispin:

It will be of no surprise to learn that many ships winter in safe ports and harbours between late October and February in the area surrounding Malta, Sicily and the toe of Italy. Heavy seas, like those which drove Paul and his fellow travellers to the safety of Malta, are commonplace during this period. That explains why it is after three months delay, living in the warmth of kind Maltese hospitality, that Julius the Centurion books his party onto an Egyptian ship which will eventually take them as near to Rome as possible.

The boat is from Alexandria, Egypt's famous port on the large and fertile Nile delta. It has spent the winter in Malta. Its joint figurehead is the twin brothers, the sons of Zeus called Castor and Pollux. Such idol figureheads are superstitiously supposed to give safety to the vessels on which they are placed. Paul's confidence is in someone else who really does exist, has real power and does care for those who trust him.

They sail the 80 miles or so to Syracuse, an important city port in Sicily. Malta, Syracuse and the toe of Italy are in a straight line from Malta to the north-east. After three days there, they circle around from there and reach Rhegium on the toe of Italy. They wait for a south-west wind to blow them through the straits of Messina, following the Italian coast up for about 180 miles to the Bay of Naples. There they arrive at Puteoli, the most important Italian port and used by the Egyptian grain fleet. Now known as Pozzuoli, about 140 miles from Rome, it is today a city and commune of the metropolitan city of Naples in the Italian region of Campania.

There are already some people in Puteoli who know and follow Jesus. These Christians are instantly warm and hospitable to their brothers in Christ, whom they have never seen before. Paul and his friends stay there for seven days. We are not told how Julius handles the accommodation of the rest of his party, but he is clearly happy for Paul to stay with fellow believers for a week.

Often when Christians show the love of Christ to one another it makes some who have not yet received Christ as Lord and Saviour, think really deeply. It fulfils John's words, 'Beloved, if God so loved us, we

also ought to love one another.’ It also produces exactly what Jesus predicted when those changed by knowing him demonstrate their loving oneness to others who have also been born again into God’s family. He said, ‘By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.’

Julius, already openly sympathetic to Paul, must be greatly impressed to witness such Christian fellowship first hand. He sees brothers and sisters in Christ enjoying being in a spiritual family of which God is their father. Julius will be even more impressed soon. Leaving Puteoli and continuing on foot towards Rome, the travellers are met on their northern trek along the Appian Way to Rome by fellow believers in Jesus.

First they are greeted at the Appii forum and then at Three Inns. These Christians have heard somehow that Paul, Aristarchus and Luke are coming to Rome. We do not know who in Rome spoke about them, but Paul is a high-profile person known well to the Roman military, amongst many others. What may stagger the centurion is that these disciples of Christ have come 43 miles south from Rome to Appii forum and 30 miles to Three Inns.

If you are a Christian, how important to you is Christian fellowship with fellow believers? Do you make your church or fellowship meetings on the Lord’s Day an absolute, not-to-be-missed-if-possible priority? Can you be counted on to support your church’s Bible study and prayer meeting? When away from home do you seek out like-minded Christians for fellowship together? Paul looks up the Lord’s people wherever he goes, and now his heart must be gladdened by those who are seeking to encourage him.

Something does seem to be going on in Julius’ mind. The party of prisoners reach Rome. The tested centurion delivers them to the captain of the guard. But Paul is treated preferentially. He is a Roman citizen not found guilty of any crime. His case must have been discussed at high military and administrative levels in Rome after his high profile hearings and adventures. He’s an exemplary prisoner with an excellent influence on his fellow travellers. It would be surprising if Julius has not commended the man who was so helpful in taking his prisoners to Rome and who never abused the centurion’s kindness. Perhaps that is why Paul is allowed to be on his own, guarded by one soldier.

But is God at work in Julius’ heart? And how many soldiers, tasked to guard Paul, will hear that Jesus died for sinners and that forgiveness is free from any that will turn from sin and receive Jesus? One wonders if any of those soldiers, or Julius himself, are included in Paul’s final greeting to the Philippian Christians from his Roman imprisonment, ‘Greet every saint in Christ Jesus, the brethren who are with me greet you. All the saints greet you, but especially those who are of Caesar’s household.’

It does not take Paul long to survey the scene, get settled in and set about seeking to win others for Christ in Rome. He takes the initiative, after three days, to call the local Jewish leaders together. They respond. Paul explains why he has arrived in Rome as a prisoner from Jerusalem, having been delivered into the hands of the Romans by the Jews, despite his not having worked against them or their traditions.

He relates that, after examination, the Romans regarded him as innocent and wanted to release him rather than execute him, but the Jewish leaders were biased and stubborn in opposing Paul. This forced him to appeal to Caesar. That is why he is in Rome and wants to see and speak with his fellow Jews to discuss his position. He confirms that he is bound because he believes in the hope of Israel, which they will recognise refers to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. He has wisely taken time to explain himself to his fellow Jews. This is a gentle start to his testifying to the Jews. He will seek to build on this foundation.

The local Jewish people in Rome seem open and reasonable as they meet God’s apostle to the Gentiles. Paul’s call from God to share the crucified, risen and ascended Lord Jesus with Gentiles does not hinder or stop him from taking this ready-made gospel opportunity to his Jewish kinsmen. A Christian burdened and dedicated to reaching a particular people group with the good news of a saviour from sin and hell must never shrink from telling others that Christ died for all, and that whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.

These particular Jews reassure Paul. No one has written to them or visited them to warn them about him. Paul alone has put them in the picture. But two key things emerge. First, they want to hear Paul. They are wide open to hear the gospel. Second, the good news about Jesus, unlike the bad news about Paul, has reached their ears and provoked opposition. Christianity is called ‘a sect’. They repeat that they have heard from others about Christianity. Ignorant of it, they cannot yet have concluded it is a sect, but they volunteer that the gospel is spoken against everywhere. At least the message of Emmanuel, God with us, and Jesus, God saves, is making people think far and wide in a very short space of time.

If you are a Christian, are you willing to share the gospel in a growingly hostile environment where Christians are spoken against?