

Derek French:

We come to the last episode in our series looking at the book of Acts. First today, we're going to be looking at the last few verses in Acts 28, as they are the final record that Luke gives us about Paul's life when he spent those two years in Rome.

Then second, from elsewhere in his New Testament letters, we're going to consider how Paul faced death.

I'm so thankful to Gerard and Phillippa Chrispin for their help with this series, and as usual Phillippa will read the last two verses of the book of Acts and then we'll hand over to Gerard.

Phillippa Chrispin:

*'Then Paul dwelt two whole years in his own rented house, and received all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ with all confidence, no one forbidding him.'*

Gerard Chrispin:

Luke draws his history of the early church to a close. He writes Acts before Paul's released from this, his first imprisonment in Rome. We know from Paul's letters about his release and then about his later imprisonment. He will finally be martyred.

So we now see the last glimpses of Paul in action, though we can still read his letters. Here we see the last three snapshots we have of a humble but bold apostle at work.

The first snapshot shows he is still what he consistently has been, since coming to Jesus Christ to save him. He is the man for all people. He is freely and totally accessible to anyone who wants to see him or talk with him. For two whole years he is confidently open for business, the King's business. His unhindered and liberal house arrest in his own rented house allows him to receive all who came to him.

Paul welcomes all, because all have sinned and come short of the glory of God. Christ died for all. God commands all men everywhere to repent and everyone who believes enters into the blessing of the gospel, because everyone who asks receives Christ and his eternal life. Paul has said, 'I have become all things to all men that I might by all means save some.' He now shows he means that by receiving all who come to his house. Remember that Jesus said, 'Come to me all you who labour and are heavy laden and I will give you rest.'

Any Christian wanting to help others to come to Christ should follow Paul's example. Paul is not a gimmicky presenter, he is a godly preacher. He believes in preaching. He engages in preaching. He is convinced that the gospel is best conveyed by preaching. He preaches in synagogues, in market places, in prisons, in houses, in the open air, in the debating places, in front of hostile crowds, in court before judges and even before a king.

He asks three questions to stress to the Roman believers that preaching is how the gospel is to be made known. 'How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher?' Whether preaching is trumpeting the message to many or gossiping the gospel to ones and twos, or anything between, Christians should preach. We should try to preach the gospel to someone at least daily.

Under Paul's second snapshot as preacher is printed, 'Preach the Word.' As he preaches the kingdom of God he will make much of King Jesus. When Jesus is king in your life, his kingdom is in you and you have entered into it. Repentance means moving off the throne and welcoming the king there to rule.

Our third snapshot is of Paul the teacher. He carefully explains in detail the Scriptures to Christian believers and to any non-Christians who are open to hear. He believes fervently that all Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.

He insists that his protégé, Timothy, should unashamedly make a practice of rightly dividing the Word of Truth. The Holy Spirit not only teaches him, he also takes Paul's words, makes them real to his hearers and points to Jesus.

To be a gospel preacher is marvellous. To be a Bible teacher is wonderful. To be both is the highest duty and privilege on earth. Paul has that duty and privilege. Millions have been blessed as a result, by God's grace alone.

Derek French:

Paul is now an old man, having served Christ for many years, and the question this brings to the fore is: how did Paul face his own death? What can we glean from his letters? Here's Gerard again.

Gerard Chrispin:

The Bible does not say when or how Paul dies so we cannot be dogmatic. Varied opinions are based on different views of tradition and evidence, but together those views may well reflect partly or completely what happened. Was Paul's appeal to Caesar heard and rejected when his two year's stay in his rented house was over? Was he then executed?

That is extremely unlikely as no Roman hearing or court could even formulate a charge to put on the indictment against him, and it was agreed by all that there was no evidence to support custody or the death sentence. And would the meticulous chronicler, Luke, have not covered any execution of Paul, the main character in Acts?

If the appeal to Caesar had been heard, it would almost certainly have been upheld and Paul would have been set free. Perhaps that happened. Or perhaps he was set free for another good reason. The Jews knew their case was very weak in Roman law and that it was based on false charges and perjured evidence from inconsistent and contradictory witnesses against Paul. They knew it could not survive under objective Roman legal scrutiny, so it is highly likely that they deliberately failed to turn up at Rome for the hearing. In that event, Caesar could decide to dismiss the case. Had the case gone ahead he would almost certainly have found, in our current legal terminology, that there was no case to answer and dismissed it. In either situation, Paul would have been freed.

It seems that Paul was set free after two years. He then seems to have continued his work in the gospel and for the churches, as you would expect from this dedicated disciple of Jesus, until he was arrested again in the wave of merciless persecution of Christians under the evil emperor, Nero. He was again imprisoned in Rome and it seems he expected to die, and perhaps to be thrown to the lions in the amphitheatre. The most accepted view seems to be that, after being tortured, he was martyred by being beheaded in Rome during Nero's persecution in A.D.67, or at least between A.D.64 and A.D.68. This would have been soon after Nero wickedly blamed the Christians for the great fire of Rome. Peter's brave martyrdom, unreported in the Bible but predicted by Jesus as being glorifying to God, is thought to have been about this time also.

But far more important than how and when Paul died is how he faced death as a Christian, as we can see from a number of references in Scripture. When Agabus the prophet had warned Paul that if he went to Jerusalem he would be bound, his reply was, 'I am ready not only to be bound but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.' He willingly served Christ, knowing that martyrdom could well await him. He had seen Stephen die as the first martyr for Jesus and knew what that meant. On leaving the Ephesian elders, as he faced chains and tribulations, what did he say? 'But none of these things trouble me, nor do I count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.'

His letter sent from custody in Rome to the Philippian church is flavoured with Paul's sense of triumph over death in Christ. He wants Christ to be 'magnified in my body, whether by life or by death.' He adds, 'For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.' And although he is willing to live on and work to help Christ's church in Philippi, he confesses to having a desire to depart and be with Christ, 'which is far better.'

As incarcerated Paul awaits the worst that Nero can do to him, he tells Timothy, 'The time of my departure is at hand.' Grateful that God has enabled him to fight the good fight, to finish the race and to keep the faith, you can almost see his thankful smile as he adds, 'Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give to me on that day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved his appearing.'

No regrets here for the man already being poured out as a drink offering in his unstinting service for the Lord who saved him. The words of C.T. Studd, the England cricketer and missionary pioneer who gave away a fortune on entering missionary service for Christ, reminds me of Paul's example. 'If Jesus Christ be God and died for me, then no sacrifice can be too great for me to make for him.' If I love Jesus, should not I make that my mission statement also?

Paul knew his sins had been judged and paid for at Calvary's cross, where Christ's blood had been shed to cleanse him from all sin, therefore the judgement of sinners at the great, white throne held no fears for him, since Jesus had already been punished in his place. But he knew that, like every Christian, he must appear before the judgement seat of Christ to account to his Lord for how he had stewarded his time, money, gifts

and entire life. He did not want to displease his Saviour or be ashamed on that day, even though his eternal salvation was already secure in Christ.

As you leave Paul and the Acts of the Apostles, please be sure that you are saved by faith in Christ. If you are saved, ask God to give you a heart for all and to seek to reach many with the gospel. As you do that, feed freely and daily on God's word and teach it to others as you are able. Trust God for his help and strength and to God be the glory.

Derek French:

And with that, we bring this edition of Serving Today to a close. Thank you for being with us, and may the Lord help us all to apply the lessons we've seen today from Paul's life and from the book of Acts in general.

This is Derek French saying goodbye, and may God bless you.