



WESTLAKE HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

"Mission Accomplished"

Sermon Series: "The Way of the Spirit"

(Final Sermon in this Series)

Acts 28:1-31

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Introduction.

Our youngest son David graduated from the University of Colorado back in May, and this summer while he was living here in Austin he received his diploma in the mail. It was a proud and happy moment when he opened the envelope and took out that sheet of paper. After changing majors 3 times and cramming four years into five, finally it was Mission Accomplished! And with David being our youngest and no more college tuition payments due, and with him landing a job back in Colorado, it feels like Lorie and I just got a pay raise, so it's Mission Accomplished for us, too!

There is a sense of joy and satisfaction whenever we achieve a goal or complete a task. Think about the emotions you've experienced whenever you've accomplished something significant in your life - when you finish planting that large flower bed; when you completed a sales presentation you worked on for weeks and you landed the account; when you got your grades at the end of the semester and you really did well; or when you make that sports team you tried out for or the band for which you auditioned?

Paul must have had those same kinds of feelings when he finally arrived in Rome. He realized he had reached his goal, and he might have even said to himself, "Mission accomplished!"

I. The Miracles of Paul on Malta.

You will remember that Paul and his companions suffered a shipwreck in the Mediterranean Sea as a result of a powerful storm. The Lord miraculously delivered the crew and passengers, and while the ship was lost, they all arrived safely to an island called Malta. It is a tiny island 58 miles off the coast of the toe of the "boot" of Italy, which is called Sicily. Luke describes the remarkable kindness of the islanders. They built a fire on the beach, which was just what was needed in the cold and rain.

Paul helped gather some brushwood to put on the fire that had been built. However, when he brought the sticks and placed them on the fire, a poisonous snake awoke in the middle of the wood and bit Paul's hand. The apostle shook off the viper and threw it into the fire. The islanders assumed that Paul was a murderer, or that he had done something wrong, and they thought that although he had escaped the destruction of the sea, the goddess of justice, *Dike*, was finding another way to punish him. So they watched to see if he would swell up or die. They waited a long time, and nothing happened, and as a result

they changed their minds and concluded that Paul must be a god himself. Neither assumption was true. Instead of being drowned by the sea or poisoned by a Roman god, Paul had been protected by the Lord Jesus Christ.

I think most of us are like the islanders on Malta. If something bad happens to us, or to someone else we know, we assume we must have done something wrong to make God angry and He is punishing us. We think that good things should happen to good people and bad things should happen to bad people.

But here we see clearly that Paul encountered these adversities in his life not because of any sin he committed, but so that the glory of God might be revealed. In the process of all the bad things that happened along the way, God's saving power was still at work.

God is not an ogre sitting up in heaven waiting to pounce on us whenever we do something wrong. He's not like Santa Claus keeping a record of who's naughty and nice and planning ways to bring retribution on the naughty. No, He is a heavenly Father who loves His children, and as a Father, He sometimes teaches us through the adversities of life. As someone has said, "Things happen to us, so that things might happen in us, so that things might happen through us." God wants to build our character and our faith, and He allows difficulties to come our way in order to draw us closer to Himself, increase our dependence on Him, and help us be a more powerful witness for Christ.

The passage also tells us that the land near the beach belonged to a man named Publius whom Luke calls the island's chief official. He brought the survivors of the wreck to his own estate and entertained all 276 of them for 3 days while arrangements could be made for their lodgings over the winter elsewhere on the island. Quite a show of hospitality!

Luke also relates the fact that the official's father was sick in bed when they arrived, suffering from a high fever and dysentery. There is actually an illness called Malta Fever which was common in the Mediterranean. Cases of the fever are long-lasting, averaging 4 months and sometimes persisting for 2 or 3 years. The micro-organism which causes it was identified in 1887 and traced to the milk of Maltese goats, and a vaccine has since been developed. But there was no vaccine in Paul's day. Instead, the apostle brought the power of heaven to bear on the man's body, and he laid his hands on Publius' father and prayed for him. The old man was healed instantly.

The result was that the news of this miracle spread throughout the island, and all of the people who were sick came to be healed. Good news travels fast, and over the next 3 months Paul engaged in a ministry of healing and teaching, and the islanders learned that, while Paul was no god, he was a messenger of the love of Jesus Christ which brings wholeness to a person's life – body and soul.

II. The Arrival of Paul at Rome.

After staying on Malta for 3 months, Paul and the ship's company managed to book passage on another grain ship from Alexandria headed for Italy for the last leg of their journey. Sailing north-northeast, the ship reached the harbor of Syracuse, on the east coast of Sicily. Then from Syracuse they made their way to Rome by sailing first to Rhegium and Puteoli, and then traveling the final leg of their journey on foot on the Appian Way,

the great Roman road of southern Italy. The news of Paul's approach had already reached Rome, and a number of believers came out to meet the apostle and accompany him to the city. Some of them got as far as The Three Taverns, a way station 33 miles outside of Rome, and others as far as the Apii Forum 43 miles from the city.

The word in this text that is translated "to meet us" really means a deputation, and it was used in antiquity for a city deputation going out to meet a general, a king or a conqueror. These people came to greet Paul as one of the great heroes of the faith, and the apostle was blown away by their gracious gesture. Seeing all these people come out to greet him, he realized he was not alone.

The follower of Jesus Christ is never alone, even though it may feel that way from time to time. Hebrews 11 assures that there is an unseen cloud of witnesses of faithful believers who have gone before us who are looking on from heaven with encouragement, cheering for us. We also have the assurance of belonging to a world-wide fellowship of other believers, a large family of faith that numbers in the millions. And we have the assurance that God is always with us by His Spirit, and that Jesus promised He would never leave us or forsake us. Do you feel lonely today? I pray that God would encourage you with His presence, His Spirit and His people. There are folks here today who want to be companions with you on the journey of faith as we follow Christ together. This is a place where you can belong.

I remember the first day I went to seminary many years ago. I had driven 1,000 miles from Atlanta to the north shore of Boston and enrolled at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. I didn't know a soul when I arrived. Having never lived for any length of time outside the south, I remember sitting in my dorm room that first evening wondering what I had gotten myself into. I felt so alone.

Just then, there was a knock at my door, and when I opened it, I saw two upper-classmen I had met very briefly when I was unloading my car - Mike Goderz and Jim Thorpe. They said, "Hey, we're going to Nick's Roast Beef for dinner. You ever been there? No? You've gotta come with us. It's the best place to eat on the north shore!"

They took me to Nick's, then they drove me to Singing Beach nearby, and I remember standing on the sand looking out at the great expanse of the Atlantic Ocean. I prayed silently to God, "Thanks, Lord, for bringing me here. And thanks for Mike and Jim and their generous hospitality by including me. I don't feel so alone anymore. And thanks for Nick's Roast Beef!"

Mike Goderz and Jim Thorpe were the beginnings of the most wonderful experience of community I think I have ever known. Some of my closest friends to this day are people Lorie and I met in seminary. It was a great gift to me. Who can you be a friend to today and let them know they aren't alone?

III. The Ministry of Paul in Rome.

When Paul arrived in Rome, he was given permission to stay in his own house with the soldier who was his guard. After 3 days he asked to meet with the Jews, and he shared with them the events that brought him to Rome. And then for 2 years, Paul stayed in his

own rented house, and the book of Acts closes by saying, "*Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ*" (28:31).

While Paul was still in chains, in Luke's eyes Paul arrived at Rome in triumph. Through his coming the gospel penetrated the official circles in the capital of the Empire, and God used his detention there for 2 years to spread the Good News of Christ throughout the city. As John R.W. Stott has written, "Though his hand was still bound, his mouth was open for Jesus Christ. Though he was chained, the Word of God was not."ⁱ

The 2 years were not wasted years. Far from it. It was during this time that Paul wrote the Prison Epistles, the books of Philippians, Ephesians, Colossians and Philemon. The apostle wrote in Philippians 1 that it was known throughout the whole Praetorian Guard that he was in chains for Christ. Can you imagine being the guard chained at the wrist to Paul? You would have heard an earful about Jesus while on duty every day!

So the book of Acts comes to an end with a note of triumph, but the ending does feel a little abrupt. What happened later? Luke never tells us. Tradition tells us that Paul was exonerated and released from prison after the 2 years and that he made a 4th missionary journey and finally reached Spain. Tradition also says that he was rearrested around 67 AD and retried and then beheaded in Rome by direct order of the emperor Nero.ⁱⁱ

It may have been that the book of Acts was written before these things happen, and some scholars even think the book was written as a part of the legal process to prove Paul was innocent of the charges brought against him. I think the reason Luke does not include these details is because that was not his purpose.

At the beginning of the book of Acts, Luke told us how Jesus commanded His followers to be His witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria and to the very ends of the earth. The story is finished; the mission is accomplished. At the beginning of the book, the church could only be numbered in the hundreds, but now it could be numbered in the tens of thousands. The story of the crucified man from Nazareth had swept across the world until now without interference it was being preached in Rome, the capital of the empire and the world's greatest city.

Luke was not writing the biography of Paul; he was telling a story of the Good News of Jesus. Because of this, Luke could write - Mission Accomplished!

Conclusion/Application.

There is one final matter I want to mention as we conclude our study of this passage as well as this great book of the Bible, and that has to do with the providence of God. Paul wrote in first chapter of the book of Ephesians, "...[God] works out everything in conformity with the purpose of His will" (1:11). Elsewhere the Bible says that "*no wisdom, no insight, no plan... can succeed against the Lord,*" and He causes "*all things to work together for the good of those who love Him*" (Pr. 21:30, Rm. 8:28).

The providence of God permeates this chapter and the whole book of Acts. Luke wants us to marvel with him at how Paul arrived safely in Rome. The apostle wanted to go there (19:21), and Jesus had told to him, "You must testify about Me in Rome" (23:11). Yet circumstance after circumstance seemed determined to make that impossible.

Paul's plan was to go straight from Jerusalem to Rome. Instead, he was arrested in Jerusalem, subjected to endless trials, imprisoned in Caesarea, threatened with assassination, nearly drowned in the Mediterranean, almost killed by the soldiers for fear of escape, and even poisoned by a snake! Each incident seemed to be designed to prevent him from reaching his divinely-appointed destination. But God's providence would not be thwarted, His providence would not fail, and Paul finally reached Rome safe and sound.

The message of the book of Acts is fear not, fret not, and sweat not, because God is at work both to will and to do according to His good pleasure. No evil plan, no Roman prison cell, no assassination attempt, no storm at sea, and no poisonous viper can ever keep God from accomplishing what is His ultimate and perfect will for you and me.

I close this morning by asking you, what great obstacle is looming large in your life and feels like it will keep you from getting to your God-given goal? What is there that is so large it eclipses the Son of God and you can't see the light ahead? Look beyond the obstacle, and look to the Lord. Take the long view, and remember the apostle Paul and the lesson of the book of Acts.

A number of years ago, I was in a difficult season in my life. I was discouraged and depressed, and I wondered what God was up to. It felt like my life was in a free-fall, and I began to think that God had lost track of me, that I wasn't even on His radar. Then one day, a member of my church named Bruce stopped by to see me. He shared with me that the previous year he had been unemployed, and it rocked his world. He began to have the same feelings I was experiencing, and He started to doubt his faith. A friend gave him a paperweight to encourage him, and it provided the reassurance he needed to see him through. And the Lord did. Now he had a great job, his confidence was recovering, and he was able to provide for his family again. Bruce said, "Here, I think God wants me to give this to you."

I looked at the saying on the paperweight, and I read these words, "The man who walks with God always gets to his destination." Tears filled my eyes when I read these words, and they spoke to my heart in a deep and powerful way. My whole perspective changed, and God showed me a way forward out of the darkness.

These are words God wants to say to you today, my friend. "The person who walks with God always gets to their destination." Never forget that the Lord is working out His perfect will for you. And in the end, you, too, will be able to say, "Mission accomplished!" Amen.

ⁱJohn R.W. Stott, *The Spirit, the Church, and the World*, p. 400.

ⁱⁱThis summary of Paul's life is put together from comments in the pastoral epistles and tradition.