

Resolved to Live – As a Witness for Jesus

“...about all that Jesus began to do and teach” (Acts 1:1).

R2L: Ever Progressing in Ministry

Acts 28:1-16

1 When they had been brought safely through, then we found out that the island was called Malta. **2** The natives showed us extraordinary kindness; for because of the rain that had set in and because of the cold, they kindled a fire and received us all. **3** But when Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks and laid them on the fire, a viper came out because of the heat and fastened itself on his hand. **4** When the natives saw the creature hanging from his hand, they began saying to one another, "Undoubtedly this man is a murderer, and though he has been saved from the sea, justice has not allowed him to live." **5** However he shook the creature off into the fire and suffered no harm. **6** But they were expecting that he was about to swell up or suddenly fall down dead. But after they had waited a long time and had seen nothing unusual happen to him, they changed their minds and began to say that he was a god. **7** Now in the neighborhood of that place were lands belonging to the leading man of the island, named Publius, who welcomed us and entertained us courteously three days. **8** And it happened that the father of Publius was lying in bed afflicted with recurrent fever and dysentery; and Paul went in to see him and after he had prayed, he laid his hands on him and healed him. **9** After this had happened, the rest of the people on the island who had diseases were coming to him and getting cured. **10** They also honored us with many marks of respect; and when we were setting sail, they supplied us with all we needed. **11** At the end of three months we set sail on an Alexandrian ship which had wintered at the island, and which had the Twin Brothers for its figurehead. **12** After we put in at Syracuse, we stayed there for three days. **13** From there we sailed around and arrived at Rhegium, and a day later a south wind sprang up, and on the second day we came to Puteoli. **14** There we found some brethren, and were invited to stay with them for seven days; and thus we came to Rome. **15** And the brethren, when they heard about us, came from there as far as the Market of Appius and Three Inns to meet us; and when Paul saw them, he thanked God and took courage. **16** When we entered Rome, Paul was allowed to stay by himself, with the soldier who was guarding him.

Have you ever heard anything like this from preachers or Christian leaders: “God desires to take your ordinary life and turn it into something extraordinary.” Or how about this one: “God intention is to do extraordinary things through you.”

Such statements put at odds the ideas of “ordinary” and “extraordinary.” It paints the idea of “ordinary” – that which is common, routine, seemingly uneventful and giving the perception that such is simply not quite good enough. Such a message subtly suggests that God frowns upon the “ordinary” because we all know that “good” Christians accomplish incredible things for God. Right?

And to be sure, at some level such thinking does make sense. For if the God who created the universe by simply uttering a word, should we not expect things to change when God enters into our lives? Of course we should expect things to change.

Working your way through the accounts of the characters in the Bible vividly reveals this reality. As we have seen in the book of Acts, the Holy Spirit used the apostles to bring literally thousands of people to faith in Jesus Christ. There is no other word to describe the efforts of the apostles in the book of Acts other than “extraordinary.” In the book of Genesis, we find a young man by the name of Joseph who goes from a forgotten prisoner to the second most powerful person of the most powerful nation in the world at that time in history. One word describes that, “extraordinary.”

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Then there is you and me. We read the biblical accounts with such extraordinary happenings and we are forced to ask ourselves, “God, is this what you desire from me? Am I to have the wisdom of Joseph to run a nation? Am I to have the faith of a teenaged Jewish girl named Mary that allows her to confidently stand with her fiancé when found to be with Child? Am I to preach in so many places and with the passion of Paul?” And then, if we fail to do something seen as extraordinary; if the church I pastor for 20 years does not go from 75 to 7,500; if not all your children follow hard after Jesus; if you do not start a Christian fellowship club on campus, if I cannot get a whole book of the Bible memorized even after faithful trying, have we, because of such things, failed?

We can all struggle with such things at times. As believers in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Creator of all things, the One who has promised to fill us with His Holy Spirit, we would like to think that we could be used, and will be used to make a major difference in our world. And yet, we, as individuals and as a congregation, often do not even know where to start to begin to make such a difference. This coupled with the fact that I am pretty certain that neither you or I will ever become the second most powerful person in the world like Joseph, we are left with the question, “What is our purpose if the extraordinary things in life are out of reach?”

I. God can work in extraordinary ways (Acts 28:1-10)

As we come back to our text in Acts 28:1-16, we have already seen that God does do extraordinary things at times and did so through Paul, not just in our text, but also throughout the book of Acts. Last week we noted the truth that God can work in extraordinary ways, protecting Paul from the bite of a deadly viper so that the natives would listen to his gospel presentation. In addition to that, Paul also healed the father of Publius, the leading man among the natives, restoring his health. God used these miracles to open the door for Paul to speak to the people about Jesus. God can work through His people in extraordinary ways.

II. God often works in ordinary ways (28:11-16)

But this brings us to the second of truths revealed in these verses. For coupled with this presentation of God working in extraordinary ways is the truth that God also, and in fact more often, works in ordinary ways. In relation to much of what we read in Bible, our lives seem to be best described as unspectacular, commonplace, what we deem as “normal.” Sure, we know that God can speak through a donkey, as He did to Balaam; we believe that God spoke in a thunderous voice as He did on the Mount of Transfiguration. We rejoice with the author of Hebrews that in times past, God spoke in these and other spectacular ways. But today we have something that 2 Peter 1:19 says is actually *“made more sure”* than the spectacular, mountain top experiences of many of the Bible personalities. Do you know what that seemingly ordinary “more sure” something is? Beloved, God speaks to us today anytime we open the Scriptures by faith. This is “the norm” – this is to be the “ordinary” – God revealing Himself, declaring what He desires from us in and through the reading, the hearing, the meditating and the memorizing of the Bible. Absolutely, God can still do the spectacular; for God can do whatever He desires. Yet, the truth is that more often than not, God works through the ordinary. And while we have seen God do extraordinary things through Paul, the fact is that even Paul experience God often working through the ordinary. This is exactly what we find in verses 11-16, showing us how the Lord provided for Paul in three very wonderful, yet very “ordinary” ways.

And it is important for us to note these ordinary means because through them, we need to come and realize that our God loves to work through us by means of such ordinary means.

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A. The Lord provided a safe journey (11-13).

At the end of three months we set sail on an Alexandrian ship which had wintered at the island, and which had the Twin Brothers for its figurehead.

Now let us stop here and take note of something. Why is it that Luke provides his readers with this information concerning the ship's design? He takes time to mention that this ship had as its figurehead the dual image of the “Twin Brothers” - two pagan gods.

Let me remind you that Paul and the other 275 survivors of the shipwreck were most likely on Malta from mid-November until around the beginning of March. It was in March then that Paul and the rest of the passengers and crew put out to sea again. They had an Alexandrian ship with the figurehead of the twin gods Castor and Pollux. Seeing their constellation, the Gemini [the Twins], while on the high seas was thought to be a sign of good fortune. They were the patron deities of sailors and protectors of innocent seafarers, and their cult had devotees in Egypt as well as Italy. Euripides presents them as guardians of truth and punishers of perjurers.

So why does Luke make mention of them? It would seem that there is an intended ironic twist involved with Paul's embarkation on the ship "The Castor and Pollux." For while the unbelieving ancients would have attributed Paul's rescue to "the Twins" and taken it as a token of his innocence, Paul has made clear he belongs to, serves and believes in the one true God, who was his protector and deliverer (Acts 27:23-25). And now, these so-called gods were carrying the ambassador of the King of kings to Rome. All of this reminds us that God often uses the inventions of unbelievers to advance His cause. And it still true today, that while others tout the gods of non-Christian religions or the secular techno-political ideology as protectors and saviors, the Christian knows who is really in gracious control.

Even this past week, without even having to leave my office, without having to take a dangerous journey, was able to get word from our missionaries living in and ministering to the people of extreme North Easter India via the internet, a technology created by the world, yet used to accomplish God's work. Here we have a ship dedicated to Castor and Pollux, false, pagan gods, supposedly the "sons of Zeus" who were regarded as the guardians of sailors. But were they really? Again, in Acts 27 Paul is clear how impotent the pagan gods were when the true God sends a storm! We need to remind ourselves a live as those who know who really is in control, the God of the Bible!

Getting back to our text, Luke continues the trip log in verses 12-13 noting, ***12 After we put in at Syracuse, we stayed there for three days [tradition says Paul started a church in Syracuse during these three days]. 13 From there we sailed around and arrived at Rhegium [located on the "toe" of Italy, 75 miles from Syracuse], and a day later a south wind sprang up, and on the second day we came to Puteoli.***

The final leg at sea covered some 210 miles, a journey that would take about 24 hours with a good south wind driving them. Luke confirms that they arrived on the following day. Puteoli was the chief seaport for Rome, a city of some 100,000 people at this time. In short, Paul had finally arrived in Italy.

As I read these verses, something stood out to me about this part of the journey. It was *uneventful*. How many times do we get in our cars, drive across town or even across the state or country, and arrive safely at our destination, and yet fail to thank the One who made it possible? Beloved, let us never forget that the Lord is at work in our lives. We take His journeys mercies for granted. We so easily we forget that every journey is made only by His gracious protection. And why is that we fail to see such things? We fail to see Him at work in such things because we often fail to recognize that many, if not most of His works are carried out the realm of the

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ordinary. It is true that God might send an angel to protect us a head-on collision, or to keep our tires from sliding on ice, but most of the time He protects us in far less impressive ways. And make no mistake, God is just as much at work in the ordinary journey as He is in His extraordinary works. God had provided Paul and his travel companions a safe and ordinary journey. But there is a second provision made as well...

B. The Lord provided people (14-15).

Paul made it to the mainland of Italy, the sailing was over, but not the traveling. The journey still had about 150 miles to go to Rome. Paul would now travel by land and most of it on the famous Appian Way. And it was on this part of the journey that God sent some special people into Paul's life. In verse 14 we read, ***There we found some brethren, and were invited to stay with them for seven days...*** What is the point? Beloved, God has His people everywhere, and when they meet there is an instant bond.

Now, listen carefully to the next six words in the text (14b). ***...and thus we came to Rome.*** Take a deep breath! What a momentous statement! For it was about three years earlier that Paul wrote a letter to the church in Rome, sharing his intense burden to come to the capital city that he might see them and fellowship with them. In Romans 1:9-11 he wrote: ***9 For God, whom I serve in my spirit in the preaching of the gospel of His Son, is my witness as to how unceasingly I make mention of you, 10 always in my prayers making request, if perhaps now at last by the will of God I may succeed in coming to you. 11 For I long to see you so that I may impart some spiritual gift to you, that you may be established;***

This was not simply some cordial but empty introduction for it is repeated again at the end of Romans. In Romans 15:23-24 we read... ***23 but now, with no further place for me in these regions, and since I have had for many years a longing to come to you 24 whenever I go to Spain — for I hope to see you in passing, and to be helped on my way there by you, when I have first enjoyed your company for a while —***

For Paul, the months turned into years and he must have wondered if his dream of making it to Rome would ever come to pass. He endured two monotonous years in a Roman prison, followed by two weeks of terror-filled days stranded at sea. The setbacks were plentiful, and yet God was immensely faithful. ***...and thus we came to Rome.***

Yet even as he came to Rome, Paul may still have wondered what the believers there had heard about him. He might have wondered if the church that met in Rome would accept him. I can only imagine that what he experienced next must have thrilled his soul. In verse 15 we read, ***“And the brethren, when they heard about us, came from there as far as the Market of Appius [some 40 miles from Rome] and Three Inns [some 30 miles from Rome] to meet us...”*** Please note the term Luke uses. He says ***“the brethren”*** came. Beloved, this is what we are, fellow Christians, *brothers and sisters in Christ*. We are a family, the family of God. And the tie that binds us together is stronger than any ordinary blood. It is the blood of Christ that relates me to you and you to me. The actions of these Roman believers show us a couple of lessons concerning ministry; things we need to remember and practice:

1. God uses His people to encourage His people.

Notice Paul's reaction in verse 15, ***and when Paul saw them, he thanked God and took courage.*** Now, on the one hand these believers did not do anything extraordinary. Beloved, they were just *there*. And this is the point. They were *there*. Your presence at the right place at the right time is used by God to bring great encouragement to God's people. And so, the next time

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you find yourself thinking that you do not need or want to go to a morning Service; or to evening Service, or to a mid-week meeting thinking, “It really does not matter if I am there,” think again. Your presence speaks loudly. It says to the preacher, “Thank you for investing study time this week to feed my soul.” It says to your fellow-worshippers, “I value you. I appreciate being with you and being with you to worship and learn about our Savior is more important to me than anything else I might do.” Yes, God uses His people to encourage His people. That is lesson one; now lesson two...

2. God uses people who make themselves available.

Hear that again... *God uses people who make themselves available.* Did you catch what great lengths these believers went in order to simply be there. They walked some 30 to 45 miles, and why? They wanted to show their love for a man they had never met, a brother named Paul. Beloved, never underestimate the power of a timely phone call, a card, an email, a text, or even a home visit. I urge you to be an encourager this week. If you would be an encourager, you must make yourself available. So, we had God using an ordinary journey and ordinary people, let us note one final “ordinary” provision...

C. The Lord provided a place to live and minister (16)

When we entered Rome, Paul was allowed to stay by himself, with the soldier who was guarding him.

Beloved, the blessings of God come in all shapes and sizes. We get our noses so bent out of shape at times, looking at the wrong aspect of our circumstances. For if Paul had expected a five-star hotel while in Rome, well then a private house with a soldier chained to his arm would have produce complaints. But Paul agenda needs to also be our agenda. And what is that agenda? It is to know Christ and make Him known to others. This could be done in a five-star hotel or in a prison cell, the location does not matter, the cause of rejoicing of the Christian is not where he or she is but how he or she gets to share Christ. We will note at the end of this chapter how Paul turned his prison house into a ministry-center and viewed the soldier bound to him as his prime target for evangelism!

By way of application, may I ask you how you view your home? Is it your home “your” home or is it actually God’s home? Does God reside there? Does God rule there? Does God minister to others through there? Is where you live merely a selfish hiding place or is it a ministry center from where you serve others? Please, do not miss this; let us be clear about something Paul was keenly aware and of which we must be keenly aware. The place you live in is simply an “ordinary” provision from our gracious God to be used for His glory. How do you view your home? Do you see how God can use the ordinary to accomplish His purposes?

Back in my days living in San Diego as a teenager, I spend many days at the beach. I loved body surfing, wading out into the water, diving into the waves and enjoying the thrill of catching a wave, being moved by its force. After doing this for some 15 minutes or so, I would realize something. I had moved. Where I ended up on the beach was usually some 30, 50, sometimes even a 100 yards from where I entered the water. This movement happened slowly and generally I was not even aware of it, but sure enough, as I look up at the landmarks on the beach, usually where I placed my towel or seeing a lifeguard tower, I had moved.

Beloved, more often than not, this is the way God works in our lives. He moves us, slowly, seemingly imperceptibly at times. But if we will stop and look up, we can see things slowly changing in our lives and in our church. Let me remind you of the “theme” verse of the book of Acts. It is found in Acts 1:8 and you know it well. It says, ***“but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon***

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you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.” Okay, yes, you have heard that, but did you get it? Let me paraphrase it in a way that might help you get this verse again. In effect, Jesus said, “I will give you the Power [the Holy Spirit] and you will be My witnesses to reach the world with My message.” At times, whether as an individual or as a church it may seem as though nothing is happening, like we are not moving; as though God’s plan has stalled. At times we may find ourselves stuck in Acts 27, tossed about in the raging seas of life or feeling stranded on some isolated island. Let me remind you to be patient. Hang on. Keep looking up because Acts 28 is coming. We have the promise of God’s Word. For in just a few months from this point in Paul’s life, Paul would write a letter to the Philippians and in 1:6 he would remind them saying, **“For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus.”** This is God’s Word, believe it! Live it!

By way of application then, as we close, let me challenge you with three things to do when you wonder what God is up to; three things that will keep your ministry to God and to others alive even when you cannot see progress:

1. Rehearse the promises of God

When you feel lost in the sea of life or stalled out on some unknown island, lift up your eyes beloved and take note of the landmarks. While at times you may feel as though nothing is happening, if we are God’s children, we will be making progress, even if it is slow. It may be that you do not see it because you are focused on the wrong things; self, the things of this world. For when your eyes are fixed on the waves of life, you will never realize that you are moving. But when you look up, you will see, God is moving you.

I love how Paul said it to the Colossians, in Colossians 3:1-2 he wrote, **“Therefore if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth.”** Awesome! Beloved, we must fix our minds on the promises of God. If you are unable to see what God is doing, ponder anew what the Almighty has said He would do! We must remember that God is keeping His promises, we can be confident of that, so we must be looking for the evidence by looking up.

The great New England preacher Phillips Brooks, best known to many of us for writing the Christmas hymn, *O Little Town of Bethlehem* but who also introduced Christ to both Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan, was known for his poise and gentlemanly manner. There were times though that he suffered moments of frustration and irritability. One day a friend saw him feverishly pacing the floor like a caged lion. “What’s the trouble, Mr. Brooks?” he asked. “The trouble is that I’m in a hurry, but God isn’t!” We can often feel that way, right?

Some of the greatest missionaries of Christianity who faithfully sowed the seed of the gospel had to wait long periods before seeing the fruit of their efforts. William Carey labored 7 years before the first Hindu convert was brought to Christ in Burma. Adoniram Judson toiled 7 years before his faithful preaching was rewarded. In western Africa, it took 14 years before one convert was received into the Christian church. In New Zealand, it took 9 years; and in Tahiti, it was 16 years before the first harvest of souls began. When you wonder what God is doing, rehearse His promises.

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2. Remember to look at the big picture

Do not get yourself stuck in the past, so focused on something that happened last month or last year that you forget to look up and see what God is doing right now? What is God changing in you right now? Or, from God's perspective, what needs to change in you? The promises of God help us. God's promises provide the frame for the picture.

There is a traditional, although extra-biblical, Hebrew story about Abraham. According to the account, Abraham was sitting outside his tent one evening when he saw an old man, weary from age and journey, coming toward him. Abraham rushed out, greeted him, and then invited him into his tent. There he washed the old man's feet and gave him food and drink. The old man immediately began eating without saying any prayer or blessing. So Abraham asked him, "Don't you worship God?" The old traveler replied, "I worship fire only and reverence no other god." When he heard this, Abraham became incensed, grabbed the old man by the shoulders, and threw him out of his tent into the cold night air. When the old man had departed, God called to his friend Abraham and asked where the stranger was. Abraham replied, "I forced him out because he did not worship you." God answered, "I have suffered him these eighty years although he dishonors me. Could you not endure him one night?" Are you seeing the big picture as you move through life? God has a good plan.

3. Realize that God is not finished with you yet.

Let me close with the familiar verses of Proverbs 3:5-6 where we read, ***5 Trust in the Lord with all your heart And do not lean on your own understanding. 6 In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He will make your paths straight.***

Soli Deo Gloria

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