

“ONWARD TO ROME”
I Kings 19:1-9, Romans 12:9-21, Acts 27:1-12
August 30 & 31, 2025

“One tribe of Native Americans had a unique practice for training young braves. On the night of a boy's thirteenth birthday, he was placed in a dense forest to spend the entire night alone. Until then he had never been away from the security of his family and tribe. But on this night he was blindfolded and taken miles away. When he took off the blindfold, he was in the middle of thick woods. By himself. All night long.

“Every time a twig snapped, he probably visualized a wild animal ready to pounce. Every time an animal howled, he could imagine a wolf leaping out of the darkness. Every time the wind blew, he wondered what more sinister sound it masked. No doubt it was a terrifying night for many boys.

“After what seemed like an eternity, the first rays of sunlight entered the interior of the forest. Looking around, the boy saw flowers, trees, and the outline of the path. Then, to his utter astonishment, he beheld the figure of a man standing just a few feet away, armed with a bow and arrow. It was the boy's father. He had been there all night long.

“Can you think of any better way for a child to learn how God allows us to face the tests of life? God is always present with us. God's presence is unseen, but it is more real than life itself.”¹ When we're in the middle of trials and struggles, we may have the tendency to think that we are all alone, facing all of our problems by ourselves. We may have to endure many dark and sleepless nights, worrying about all that could possibly happen to us. But as we come to realize that we are not alone, we have the opportunity to see the beauty that is all around us, and the many ways that God is protecting us and interceding for us. And we have the members of our tribe (the church) here with us, as well, offering support and encouragement, too.

¹ (PreachingToday.com, *More Perfect Illustrations*, [Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2003] pg. 117-118)

That is a similar situation that Paul found himself in. As we continue our walk through the Book of Act we find him in a brand new experience. We've seen that he had accepted God's call on his life to be a missionary to the Jews and Gentiles. He had boldly gone throughout the countries and cities of the northeastern Mediterranean Sea with the Good News of Jesus Christ. He had endured beatings, arrests, sickness, hunger, stoning, ridicule, and unjust accusations. Yet, he faithfully continued to take the Gospel of Jesus to both Jew and Gentile with the hope of many receiving Jesus as Savior and Messiah.

With all of that surrounding him, it might have been easy for Paul to have thought that God was not with him. It might have become so easy for him to be consumed with the wickedness of the world that his heart turned against those around him. However, because the Holy Spirit continued to work in and through him, he was able to say, "*Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord*" (Romans 12:14-19). Paul did not become bitter and judgmental toward those who persecuted him. Instead, he reached out to them with the love of Jesus Christ, so that they might receive Him and find Salvation through Him. And that couldn't have happened if he had held grudges or was continually angry with others.

And that is a huge lesson for each one of us. As we come to understand that Jesus is always with us, through the work of the Holy Spirit, we can begin to see that we are not alone, but rather surrounded by God's goodness, love, and beauty. As we know that God walks with us

and travels with us and protects us from harm, as we seek to do His work of helping others know about Jesus, we can let the ugliness of the evils of this world go, and we can focus on sharing Jesus with those around us. With the help of likeminded believers, our hope and work increases.

Last week we heard how Paul had been “tried” before Governors Felix and Festus, and before King Agrippa and the leaders of the military and the city officials of Caesarea. At the end, they were in agreement that Paul had done nothing wrong to deserve death and could have gone free if he had not appealed to Caesar. But since he had sought out the higher court, Festus made arrangements to send Paul to the Emperor, to Rome.

Listen to how the beginning of his trip shaped up. This is Acts 27:1-12. (READ Acts 12:1-12).

Remember that Jesus had told Paul that he would go to Rome, and there, he could continue to share the Gospel message with all the people. But I’m not sure Rome was exactly where Paul wanted to go. Yet, God had taken him this far, so He was not about to abandon Paul. God would still be with him, even on a very dangerous voyage toward Rome. So, Paul was able to meet with fellow believers in Sidon, and to interact with the others onboard the ships that carried him toward Rome. It was not going to be a wasted time. Paul had learned how to make the most of every opportunity God laid out for him. Despite his imprisonment and his transport to Rome, Paul used that very occasion to share the Good News of Jesus Christ.

But how about us? Can we use even the most undesirable situation to bring glory to God through our faith in Jesus Christ? It is possible that even when persecution is at its maximum level, that we have the greatest chance to change the life of someone near us. Take for example a man named John.

“John Rucyahana, the Anglican bishop of Shyira, Rwanda, served as a pastor in Uganda

during the brutal reign of Dictator Idi Amin. Amin had targeted 200,000 political opponents, Christian leaders, and members of certain ethnic groups for extermination.

“One day the government soldiers came for John. He remembers, ‘One of the men put the cold barrel of a gun against my ear and held his finger on the trigger. They put me in a vehicle and made me sit on a sack of explosives. As we began moving, I thought, *Even the slightest jolt, and I'm dead.*’

“The soldiers finally released John, figuring they had successfully intimidated him and that he would no longer speak out. What the oppressors meant for evil, though, God used for good. Two days after John's harrowing brush with death was Sunday. That Sunday, John walked into the cathedral to find it packed--people were standing in the aisles. People had heard what happened and had come to find out what he would say. Would he speak out for Christ?

“John did speak for Christ, only this time to a larger group than he could ever have gathered on his own.”² God used his abduction to collect a crowd of people wanting to hear about Jesus Christ. Instead of being intimidated, God used John's situation to further promote the cause of Christ.

Likewise, God used Paul's situation to further His Kingdom. Though it was not a luxury liner, there were 276 men onboard the ships that Paul could talk to and share the message of Salvation through Jesus with (27:37). Though the winds were not working with the sailors to get them directly to Rome, every day was a chance for Paul to address another person and help them to see the need for them to receive Jesus as their Savior. Roman, Jew, Gentile alike, Paul had a captive audience in which to share the most marvelous news in the world - the love of God through Jesus Christ for the Salvation of the world.

² (PreachingToday.com, *More Perfect Illustrations*, pg. 290)

But things don't always go the way that we plan. Paul was attempting to be faithful to Jesus' call to take Him to all people, wherever he went, and God directed his journey to go in a direction that would reach many more people for Christ. But Paul didn't know that as he was traveling, yet he remained faithful, knowing that God was always with him, even as he was going into the heart of the enemy's camp in the capital of the Roman Empire.

How does that work for us here in our world today? When faced by the enemy, when surrounded by the very soldiers and agents of death, when held captive by an evil government, how do we continue to live for Jesus? How will we respond to the setbacks and disappointments in our lives, even as we strive to be faithful witnesses for Jesus?

You see, when our world gets turned up-side-down, we have the tendency to think that we are all alone, that God has left us, and that we have to face the world all on our own. Surely, struggles and trials will come upon us. Surely, we will face difficult situations that may cause us to doubt God's presence. Certainly we will all have to endure times when we could easily throw in the towel and give up.

Yet, if we remain faithful in all our ways, if we keep our confidence in Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior, if we surround ourselves with other faithful followers of Jesus, then no matter what we have to face, God will provide for us, protect us, and use us as He wills to bring Him glory. Listen to how William Carey faced a very difficult situation.

"Often called the father of modern missions, William Carey faced a ministry disappointment of overwhelming proportions. Carey began his missionary career to India in 1793. He labored in that country for 40 continuous years, never once returning to his native England.

"Carey was a prodigious translator, translating portions of Scripture into over a dozen Indian languages. However, one afternoon, after 20 years of plodding labor in that country, a

fire raged through his printing plant and warehouse. All of his printing equipment was destroyed, but most tragically, many of his precious manuscripts were completely consumed by the fire. Of course, Carey had no computer backup files or Xerox masters, [nothing on the internet cloud he could retrieve his documents from]. Twenty years of nonstop labor were gone within a few hours. How would he respond to this crushing devastation?

“Carey wrote to his pastor-friend, Andrew Murray, in England: ‘The ground must be labored over again, but we are not discouraged. . . . We have all been supported under the affliction, and preserved from discouragement. To me the consideration of the divine sovereignty and wisdom has been very supporting. . . . I endeavored to improve this our affliction last Lord's Day, from Psalm 46:10, “*Be still and know that I am God.*” I principally dwelt upon two ideas:

- 1) “God has a sovereign **right** to dispose of us as **He** pleases.
- 2) “We ought to acquiesce in **all** that God does with us and **to** us.”³

Instead of bemoaning the fact that 20 years of work was now burned up, William Carey continued to follow the Lord and started right where he was and used that very fire to move forward in his translation of the Scriptures into native languages throughout India. God had allowed the fire to destroy the printing equipment, ink and written documents. So it was not for Carey to argue or complain, but to begin again and continue the work as God gave him strength to do so. Who knows, it may have given him a greater outreach to the native peoples as he had to once more gain the information to compile the whole Bible into their languages. God can turn any disappointment into a victory if we remain faithful and keep working for Him.

And Paul did that very same thing. God was disposing of him onto that ship so that he

³ (PreachingToday.com, *More Perfect Illustrations*, pg. 165-166)

could reach those 276 men while on his way to reach even more in Rome. And instead of fighting against it, or complaining against it, or grouching over how much time and energy had been lost, Paul submitted his situation to God and allowed God to lead him through it to touch the lives of the men aboard that ship. Obviously, with the help of the physician, Luke, and the Thessalonian, Aristarchus, who were traveling with Paul, God did a marvelous work. Paul used every encounter for the purpose of reaching out to the men on those ships so that they might not only see what a difference Jesus made in the life of one who gave their life to Jesus, but to help them to come to know Jesus on a personal basis, too.

We'll see more of what happened to Paul and his companions in the next couple weeks. But it is vital that we learn from his example, and trust in the Lord Jesus to use us, too. **It is ours** to know that God has a plan for our lives (Jeremiah 29:11) to become proficient in giving glory to Him as He uses us right where we are. **It is ours** to give ourselves completely over to God's work and His plan for us so that we might reach even the enemy who is persecuting us for the sake of Jesus Christ. Though it is very tempting and easy to argue or complain or second guess God's plan, if we faithfully continue to serve Him wherever we are, we, too, will see huge results in the lives of those around us.

You see, being a follower of Jesus Christ is not just something we say we are, but something we do every day of our life. It was easy for Paul to SAY he was a follower of Jesus, but the way he lived his life, the way he spoke, and the way he acted, demonstrated to all those around him that he **was** a follower of Jesus. He was totally committed to letting God use him in every situation, to be the witness of the difference Jesus made in his life. His testimony showed where he had started - as a Pharisee, yet completely against the Messiah. It told how Jesus interacted in his life and how Jesus had called him into service and how he was changed from a

persecutor to a follower and promoter of Jesus. It told how God empowered him and used him to help many people find the promised Messiah in Jesus of Nazareth despite persecution. And it showed the difference life could be for those who followed Jesus with all their heart, soul, mind and strength. Paul proclaimed the fulfillment of the prophecies of the Messiah and gave everyone the chance to find favor with God once again as they put their trust and faith in Jesus.

That was Paul's calling in life. But that's God's call for each one of us in our lives, too. It's not about us doing our own thing in the exclusion of Jesus in our life! It's all about us living for Jesus so that others might see the value of knowing Christ Jesus as Lord (Philippians 3:8)! It's about us being the bold witnesses of Jesus everywhere we go, so that those around us might find hope and joy and peace and love and life as they come to know Jesus through us. We are the witnesses to the world of who Jesus is. But what is that witness? Is it good; or is it bad?

I pray that each of us might be willing to have Jesus so deeply rooted in our lives that we live for Him - in our homes, in our schools, in our work spaces, in our social groups, in our communities, and in our church. It's not about us! It's all about us submitting ourselves into the service of Jesus to proclaim Him everywhere we go. We'll never be alone, for Jesus promised to go with us always, and there will be those other faithful followers of Jesus who will go with us, too. We are just called to be faithful and go where He sends us. So wherever God sends you, be His witness of the love of Jesus Christ! Let's pray...

Father, it is so easy for us to look at Paul's life and say, "Well, that worked out for him," and miss Your calling for each one of our own lives. You have called us to be Your missionaries, and invite us to submit ourselves to Your guidance and direction, and go everywhere in the world to help people to come to know Jesus as our Savior and Lord. Give us the courage to accept Your call, and to go wherever You have planned for us. There is no age limit in service to You, Lord. Young or old, You call us to be Your witnesses everywhere we go. Give us faith to do just that, in Jesus Great and Powerful Name. Amen.