

Place: Lurgan Baptist 27:3:2012

THE CHURCH ABLAZE

Reading: Acts 28: 1-31

38. ROME AT LAST

Gicomo Puccini was a great composer whose operas number among the world's favorites. Even after he was stricken with cancer in 1922, he was determined to write a final opera, "***Turandot***," which some consider his best. As his illness grew worse, his students implored him to rest and save his strength, but he persisted. At one point he remarked, "*If I do not finish my music, my students will finish it.*" In 1924, Puccini went to Brussels to be operated on, where he died two days after his surgery. His students did finish "***Turandot***," and in 1926 the premiere was held in Milan under the baton of Puccini's favorite student, Arturo Toscanini. All went brilliantly until they came to the point in the score where the teacher had been forced to put down his pen. Toscanini, his face wet with tears, stopped the production, put down his baton, turned to the audience and cried out, "***Thus far the master wrote, but he died.***" After a few moments, his face now wreathed in smiles, Toscanini picked up his baton and cried out to the audience, "***But his disciples finished his work.***" They finished the opera. The Book of Acts is the story of "*all that Jesus began both to do and teach until the day in which he was taken up.*" (1:1, 2) The work that He began was to completed by His disciples

who were to be His "*witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.*" (1:8) I mean think of the cities where the gospel had already reached. Antioch, Philippi, Corinth, Ephesus and others but now the very centre of Rome was to feel the impact of Christ's greatest apostle. You see, to a Jew Rome would be "*the uttermost part of the earth.*" (1:8) For the gospel to have reached Rome meant witnessing not only to those who held a true religion, though inadequately (Jerusalem) nor to those who held a mixed religion, partly true and partly false (Samaria) but it meant witnessing to those who had no real vital religion at all. These were "*the Gentiles*," mentioned in (28:28) And so in one sense it was mission accomplished with the gospel going to the remotest part of the earth. And yet in another sense Dr. Luke leaves the story open and ongoing. You see, Christ's followers have been carrying on this mission for over 2,000 years. C. H. Spurgeon says "*What was begun with so much heroism ought to be continued with ardent zeal since we are assured that the same Lord is mighty still to carry on His heavenly designs.*"

Now while the book of Acts is called , "*The Acts of the Apostles*," its often also called "*The Acts of the Holy Spirit.*" But we could also refer to it as "*The Acts of the Apostle Paul.*" This is not to diminish the role of the other apostles and certainly not to diminish the power of the Holy Spirit. Rather it is to say that if the book has a central character it has to be the apostle Paul. Even though he does not appear unto the end of (Ch 8) he remains on the stage as the central figure throughout right

to the end of the book. Do you recall what Paul said when he was in the city of Ephesus ? “ *I must also see Rome.* ” (19:21) He repeatedly expressed that desire to the Roman Christians, he says “ *For I long to see you that I may impart unto you some spiritual gift to the end ye may be established.* ” (1:11) He says, “ *Having a great desire these many years to come unto you. Whensoever I take my journey into Spain, I will come to you.* ” (Rom 15:24) Did Paul see Rome as a possible base for the extension of his ministry into Spain and beyond ? One thing is sure, at long last the time had come for God to grant his faithful servants desire. Do you recall what the psalmist said, “ *Delight thyself also in the Lord and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart.* ” (37:4) Paul would at last see Rome. Now he wanted to go to Rome as a preacher but God sent him as a prisoner. He had been arrested in Jerusalem, he had spent two years in confinement in Caesarea and now he’s shipwrecked on the Mediterranean island of Malta. Now as we bring this series to a close there are three pictures that I want you to see.

(1) PAUL’S POWERFUL TESTIMONY

How many have ever been to the island of Malta ? Malta which means “ *refuge,* ” is situated about 60 miles of Sicily and its about 17 miles long and 9 miles wide. Malta became a British possession early in the nineteenth century and gained its independence in 1964. Since its not a large island it would not have taken long for the shipwrecked sailors to discover where they were. Now to the Greeks anyone who did not speak Greek was a

“ *barbarian.* ” but these people proved to be kind and sympathetic. It was cold and rainy and the men were wet from swimming ashore. The natives showed them extraordinary kindness by kindling a bonfire and helping the men find lodging for the winter. Now it was here on the island of Malta for a period of three months that Paul exerted a powerful testimony. Notice for example that Paul,

(a) TESTIFIED TO THE PROTECTION OF GOD:

After surviving a storm and shipwreck Paul never expected to have his life threatened by a snakebite but that’s exactly what happened. Notice there was,

1. Pagan Hospitality:

Look if you will at (28:1-2) It could have been so much different for they could have been attacked by the native population but they were shown unusual kindness as the natives built a fire to help the soggy visitors dry out.

2. Personal Activity:

For the great apostle did not see himself above helping out in mundane tasks like gathering sticks. After all he had done for the passengers Paul could have requested a throne and insisted that everyone serve him. Instead he did his share of the work and helped gather fuel for the fire. He is as anxious to do the little task of gathering sticks as he is the large ones of confronting Caesar. From his position as a prisoner on the ship and he may have

been chained at the very time he is gathering the sticks, but from his position as a prisoner he is risen to rule the ship. *We remember that, don't we ?* He's really been the man telling ever body what to do and securing the whole situation. But now when they're on the shore and the situation changes really Paul is still the leader because he's the resource that all of them have. And by now his credibility is established. But when it comes time to gather the sticks he doesn't start giving orders to 275 others he just goes and gets the sticks himself. *Isn't there something very exciting about a leader who is willing to do the very thing that is the menial humble task that usually doesn't belong to the leadership ?* Is this not true spiritual leadership ? Fourteen days fighting a hurricane, fourteen days without food, he's just managed to swim through the hurricane surf to get to the shore, he's soaking wet, it's raining like mad, the wind is blowing at a terrible rate and here he is picking up sticks to kindle a fire to warm the rest of the people. You see, no task is too small for the servant of God who has "*the mind of Christ.*" (Phil 2:5) One rainy day a man accompanied by two women arrived at Northfield hoping to enroll his daughter in D.L. Moody's school for young women.

The three needed help in getting their luggage from the railway depot to hotel, so the visitor "*drafted,*" a rather common looking man with a horse and wagon assuming he was a local cabby. The "*cabby,*" said he was waiting for students, but the visitor ordered him to take them to the hotel. The visitor was shocked when the "*cabby,*" did not charge him, and was even more shocked to discover that the "*cabby,*" was D.L. Moody himself. You see,

Moody was a leader because he knew how to be a servant. Do you recall our Saviour taking a towel and washing the dirty feet of the disciples ? (Jn 13:5) I wonder is that beneath you ? Do you think you are "*to high and mighty,*" to wash feet and gather sticks ? Can you see what happened here ? 1,2,

3. Protective Immunity:

For suddenly as Paul laid a bundle of sticks on the fire a snake was driven out of the pile by the heat and bit Paul on the hand. He calmly shook it off into the fire. But the natives concluded that Paul must be a murderer, and that even though he had escaped from the sea, justice had not allowed him to live. They waited and watched for him to swell up and fall down dead. But when nothing happened they changed their minds and concluded that he was a god. This was not the first time that Paul had been mistaken for a god, (14:6) and he no doubt quickly set the islanders straight. Now do you see (28:5) Now is this not a fulfillment of what the Lord said to His disciples. Do you remember (Mk 16:15-18) ? Now here He says to His disciples, "*You're go to go in the world and many signs are going to accompany your ministry.*"

(16:17-18) Now I ask is this for today ? It's interesting that the people who claim that the speaking in tongues is not just for the apostles are not as anxious to claim the drinking of poison and playing with poisonous snakes. You see, God uses these miracles to confirm the ministry of the apostles. And here is Paul knowing the protection of God. I mean had the Lord not said, "*As thou hast*

testified of me in Jerusalem so must thou bear witness also at Rome.” (23:11) You see, Paul was immortal until his work was done. And is it not the same with us ? Do you realise that no weapon of Satan can thwart the purpose of God ? That serpent may be criticism, depression, or persecution but the Lord is able to see you through. (a)

(b) TESTIFIED TO THE PROVISION OF GOD:

For this shipwrecked company not only found safety but sympathy, help, cheer, and all they needed. I mean look if you will at (28:7) You see, God provided for his servants through the unusual hospitality of the natives on Malta. Publius the Roman governor and the leading man of the island entertained this company for three days, found them lodging for the winter and honoured them with many gifts when they departed. *It raises the whole question of hospitality does it not ?* Do you recall that Paul list’s this as one of the marks of an elder ? Paul says he’s to be “ *given to hospitality.*” (1 Tim 3:2) But beyond that hospitality is to be characteristic of all Christians. Peter says, “ *Use hospitality one to another without grudging.*” (1 Pet 4:9) My have we not neglected what Alexander Strauch calls “ the hospitality commands ?” Are we examples of lifeless, loveless, inhospitable Christianity ? Do you know something ? It does not take people long to figure out that there is a “ *churchy,*” love among believers that ends at the back door of the church or in the car park.

It’s a superficial kind of love that is unwilling to venture beyond the walls of the church building, that is unwilling to open the doors of our homes one to another and do you know who are most guilty of it. **Fundamental churches.** You and me. Yet the Lord Jesus said, “ *He that receiveth a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet’s reward and he that receiveth a righteous man in the name of a righteous man shall receive a righteous mans reward. And whosoever shall give to drink one of these little ones a cup of cold water only in the name of a disciple, verily I say unto you he shall in no wise lose his reward.*” (Matt 10:40-42) You see, Publius was soon to discover that in ministering to Paul and the Christians he was entertaining angels unawares, for Paul witnessed not only (a) (b) but he,

(c) TESTIFIED TO THE POWER OF GOD:

For look if you will (28:8-9) The word for “ *fever,*” in the Greek (*puretos*) means a gastric fever. “ *Bloody flux,*” (*dusenterio*) is a word from which we get the word dysentery which is an intestinal disease. Some scholars tell us that this was a common problem in Malta because they had a certain kind of microbe in the goat’s milk. So here is Publius father who has what we may call “ *Maltese Fever,*” and so Paul enters in prays lays his hands on him and heals him. Soon the word spreads and sick people from all over the island were brought to Paul for to heal them and he did. Now do you know what the Lord was doing here ? He was corroborating the testimony of the gospel. Peter when he performed miracles earlier in the book of Acts preached Christ. Paul

when he performed miracles preached Christ. So if Paul healed, then you can be sure that Paul preached and these miracles were to authenticate the ministry of the gospel. And tradition tells us that Paul founded in these days the church at Malta. *And tradition also tells us that the first pastor of the Maltese church was Publius. And very likely if he had a house that could handle 276 guests that's probably where the church began too. Publius may well have been the first pastor and the church could have met in his house. Someday we'll check out the Lamb's Book of Life and perhaps we'll see a list of Maltese names and at the top will be Publius and maybe after it will be names like Julius, a Roman centurion and a few other people from a certain ship that had a wreck on the coast of Malta. My what a testimony Paul had. God Protecting, God Providing, God Proving, establishing the gospel through healings. (1)*

(2) PAUL'S PEACEFUL JOURNEY

Well, it was certainly peaceful in comparison with the last one. Paul and the party remained on Malta for three months and thanks to Paul they were treated graciously and sent on their way with generous gifts. Paul was now on the last leg of the journey. Can you see,

(a) THE SHIP THAT TRANSPORTED HIM:

For Luke takes great care in identifying it. Look if you will at (28:11) This was another of those Alexandrian grain vessels, a cargo ship in the service of the Roman empire. “ *Castor and Pollux,*” were deities that the

Greeks believed protected sailors and boats on the sea. So the images of these two mythical gods graced the bow or some other prominent part of the ship. My the Greeks believed in mythical deities but it was the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who protected the passengers and crew of the original ship with not a single soul lost.

(b) THE STOPS THAT REFRESHED HIM:

Did you notice there were three stops on the way to Rome ?

1. Syracuse: on the island of Sicily: where they rested for three days. According to tradition Paul founded a church in Syracuse during the three day stop over.

2. Rhegium: was on the toe or south coast of Italy. Here they waited for a suitable wind to take the ship through the Straits of Messina which separate Sicily from the Italian mainland.

3. Puteoli: modern Pozzuoli was the most important commercial port in Italy. Although almost 150 miles from Rome it was the capital's chief seaport. Located on the bay of Naples near modern Naples, Puteoli in Paul's day was a city of 100,00 people. It's not surprising therefore that Paul and his companions found some brethren that is believers in Puteoli. My can you imagine the joy and comfort that this local group of believers brought to the heart of the great apostle ? I mean at this point Paul realized that he was nearing his journeys ends, He had appealed to Caesar, the fulfillment of his desires was fast

approaching. But he had no idea of what awaited him in Rome. No doubt he was a little apprehensive as he considered the possibilities and so a week in the presence of God's people would refresh his spirit. My do we take the fellowship of God's people for granted ? I mean if we were stuck in Iran tonight would we not appreciate each other a little more ? Can you imagine this week ? Everyone would want the latest news from Jerusalem and the Holy Land. People would want to know all about the voyage and Paul's story of the shipwreck. There would be frequent ministry of the Word, questions and answers and urgent prayers meetings about Paul's future. Paul also would want the latest news from Rome. My can you see the picture that is emerging here ? (a) (b)

(c) THE SAINTS THAT ENCOURAGED HIM:

From years now these verses have touched my soul. Look at (28:15) Now there is,

1. Something Geographical Here:

You see, word from Puteoli had reached Rome, that Paul and his companions had arrived. So the first group of Christians went out from Rome and met Paul at the Forum of Appius 43 miles from the city and the second group met him at the Three Taverns 10 miles nearer to the city, for some saints will go farther than others.

2. Something Spiritual Here:

Remember Paul had one more than one prison experienced. It had been imprisoned in Philippi, in Jerusalem, in Caesarea and now it was as a prisoner that he was nearing Rome. Three times the Lord met Paul's special need as he endured imprisonment. Do you recall in Jerusalem after been nearly killed we read, "*And the night following the Lord stood by him and said, be of good cheer Paul*" (23:11) Do you recall in the midst of the storm Paul testified, "*For there stood by me this night the angel of God whose I am and whom I serve.*" (27:23) But in the present text we read that it was "the brethren," Paul's fellow Christians in Rome who stood by in support, sympathy, and compassion. My is that what you do ? Do you encourage the servants of God, the people of God, the workmen of God ? I mean this was doing something *Practical*: they were just there for Paul. My you don't have to say anything, do anything, there are at times your presence is enough. Just to be there to shake that hand in the time of bereavement, just to be there to touch that shoulder in the time of job loss, just to be there ! Now are you there ? It was something *Sacrificial*: They had to walk 43 miles and 33 miles respectively, and no doubt they brought some provisions for Paul. Do you see the effect it had on him ? "*Whom when Paul saw he thanked God and took courage.*"

3. Something Emotional Here:

Was Paul discouraged ? Why is he discouraged? Well, maybe he's sick, maybe the strain of all the years, maybe the anticipation of an impossible task in Rome, maybe the realization that he's a prisoner and he's afraid he might be

confined and unable to minister. Maybe he wonders whether the Christians in Rome will receive him. Paul is on the last lap of the journey and he's thinking " *I wonder if the Christians are going to receive me, I wonder how it's going to work ?*" And he's discouraged and despondent and 43 and 33 miles from town those Christians have walked and they greet him as he comes in the caravan chained as a prisoner and they go along with him. It had been three year since he wrote the Roman letter. Three years since he had said, " *For I long to see you,*" and they had remembered him. They are walking by his side and so you can see the result of it. " *he thanked God and took courage.*" My do you need to be a Barnabas to that servant of Christ ? To that sister in Christ, to that brother in the Lord. Why, your very presence could life their spirits and thrill their soul. Now does God keep His promises ? Well, look at (28:16) Think with me of,

(3) PAUL'S PURPOSEFUL MINISTRY

Now in Rome Paul was under house arrest. He had a great deal of freedom to meet with other people and to talk about Jesus Christ. Never one to waste time Paul quickly summoned the Jewish leaders to explain why he was a prisoner here. Thus his ministry begun. Some of have read the books of Joni Eareckson Tada who on a summer day in 1967 dove into the Chesapeake Bay and lost touch with her body forever. She writes,

Before the accident my questions had always been. " How will God fit into this situation ? How will He

affect my dating life ? My career plans. The things I enjoy." All those options were gone. It was me, just a helpless body and God. My need for help is obvious every day when I wake up, flat on my back, waiting for someone to come dress me. I cannot even comb my hair or blow my nose alone.

Yet to see Joni sing and speak is to see someone who has given her limitations to God so that He can do His great work through her. Was it not the same with Paul ? I mean who would ever thought that a chained prisoner could reach Rome and more ? As James Stalker so beautifully pointed out, " **Paul's room became a fulcrum from which he moved the world.**" How did that come to be ? Well, notice that Paul's prison ministry was,

(a) **TYPICAL:**

He began with whom ? The Jews. My have we not seen this ? In city after city it had been Paul's pattern to go first to the Jewish community. And though Paul was accused of being anti-Semitic that was opposite the truth. (Rom 9:1-3 10:1) I mean if he could not go to the Jews then the Jews must be invited to come to him. You talk about a home Bible study this must have been the most exciting home Bible study in history. But can you sense this mans burden for his fellow country men ? After thirty years of persecution by the Jews Paul still wants to win them for Christ. *What about you ?* How deep is your burden for souls ? Is it deep enough to pray for them ? To witness to them ? To compel under the sound of the gospel ? (a)

(b) SCRIPTURAL:

For after summarizing what happened over the last two years Paul sought to persuade them concerning Jesus Christ that He is God's promised Messiah. *Now do you see Paul's source of authority ?* I mean it was the Law of Moses and the Prophets, it was the Old Testament. Paul probably took them to the texts in Moses that describe the Jewish sacrificial system, showing that these sacrifices pointed ahead to the Lord Jesus. He would have taken them to Psalm 16, which both Peter and Paul used to show the truth of the resurrection (2:25-28; 13:34-37) He no doubt took them to Psalm 22, which describes death by crucifixion centuries before this was known as a means of execution. He would have taken them to Isaiah 53, which describes the death of Christ, with amazing detail. Paul preached the gospel to these experts in the Old Testament from the Old Testament. *Now is your ministry Biblical ? Is it Christological ? Does it point folk to Christ ?* Do you see the outcome ? (28:24) You see, the gospel is a dividing force. It separates people into two camps. Believers and unbelievers. Paul's ministry now,

(c) WAS JUDICIAL:

Do you see (28:25-28) ? You see, Paul is simply declaring that the Jewish leaders who don't believe in their Messiah are a fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. And because of Israel's unbelief the Lord was turning to the Gentiles with the offer of salvation. (28:28) *Now this is significant.* It was not enough that the Jerusalem Jews had rejected the Saviour, the Spirit and the Scriptures, but now

the Roman Jews had endorsed the same rejection as indeed Jews had in city after city. It was the final straw. The Holy Spirit pronounced God's doom on the nation, the final withdrawal of Jewish religious privilege and the transfer of spiritual blessing to the Gentiles. Paul himself says to these Roman Christians " *that blindness in part is happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles be come in.*" But after this " *all Israel shall be saved.*" (Rom 11:25-26) In the mean time like Paul we should commit ourselves to fulfilling the Great Commission. So can you see that this prison ministry was (a) (b) (c)

(d) WAS METHODICAL:

I mean how did Paul preach to these Jewish leaders ?

1. Lovingly: (28:17-20) Nothing could be finer than the spirit in which he approached these leaders.

2. Clearly: The Bible says " *he expounded,*" it means to " *set out,*" or " *place before.*"

3. Tirelessly: " *from morning till evening,*" (28:23) This was not a hour of study and then coffee and biscuits. This was ten to twelve hours of serious discussion.

4. Persuasively: All his persuasive powers were to brought to bear upon his hearers. My Paul was a fighter and he sought to persuade these Jewish leaders " *concerning Jesus.*" Kent Hughes tells us that during the gymnastics portion of the 1976 Olympics a Japanese athlete broke his leg during one of his routines and

everything thought he was finished. As the competition turned out the last day's performance would determine whether the championship went to the Japanese or the Russians. Despite the fact that his leg was broken the injured athlete mounted the rings for a final performance and it was sparkling. The look of pride on his face as he ran through the exercise was tremendous. But there was also obvious anguish as from ten feet in the air he came hurtling to the floor for his dismount, landing on his broken leg. His fighting spirit made him too strong to be defeated. With his goal firmly in mind, he refused to quit no matter how severe the pain. My that was Paul.

5. Confidently: For do you see (28:31) ? Oh, there was a boldness as Paul sought to preach Christ.

(e) WAS INFLUENTIAL:

Look if you will at (28:30) What happened during those two years ? Well, there was,

1. Paul's First Circle of Influence:

Do you see (28:16) There was a soldier that kept him. Paul was under guard twenty four hours a day and he was in chains. (28:20) The Greek word (halusis) means a short length of chain connecting the wrist of the prisoner with the wrist of the guard. The praetorian guard was made up of 10,000 elite troops stationed in Rome. So for twenty hours a day, each with a shift of six hours one after another of these elite soldiers would be chained to Paul and forced to listen, as he preached, prayed and taught. I

mean can you picture it ? Paul had a captive audience. No wonder some of them were saved. (Phil 1:12-14 4:22) Can you not imagine that Paul was a common topic of conversation in the barrack room ? “ *You're assigned to Paul today. Good luck to you my friend. Watch out he does not convert you to His Saviour Jesus Christ.* ” 1.

2. Paul's Second Circle of Influence:

I mean it was during this time that Philemon's runaway slave Onesimus came to Rome and Paul led him to Christ. (Philemon 10-21) He sent him back to Philemon and said, “ *Philemon receive him “ not now as a servant but above a servant, a brother beloved specially to me, but now much more unto thee.* ” I mean was that teaching not influential ? 1, 2,

3. Paul's Third Circle of Influence:

For during these two years in Rome Paul wrote the prison letters, Philippians, Ephesians, Colossians and Philemon. And through those letters he has touched millions right around the world. My what have you done with your prison circumstances ? What have you done with your limitations ? Like Paul have you taken them and used them to spread His name abroad ?

(f) WAS CONTINUAL:

“ *And Paul dwelt two years* ” (28:30-31) Luke never tells us the outcome of Paul's trial but we have every

reason to believe that Paul was released and that he resumed his ministry perhaps traveling as far as Spain. (Rom 15:25, 28) During this period (A.D. 63-66/67) he wrote letters to Timothy and Titus. He left Titus in Crete (Titus 1:5) Trophimus sick in Miletus (2 Tim 4:20) Wherever he went he sought to bring Jews and Gentiles to faith in Christ. ***He was arrested again, probably about the year 67 and this time his situation was changed drastically.*** He did not live in a house but was chained in a prison and treated like a criminal. (2 Tim 1:16 2:9) Paul knew that the end was coming and so he writes to Timothy, “ *For I am now ready to be offered and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith.* ” (2 Tim, 4:6-7) Tradition tells us that he was beheaded at Rome in 67 or 68. Somebody says, “ *Poor old preacher Paul. He bit the dust.* ” No, he didn't bite the dust, he hit the tape. About that time I can hear old Paul saying, “ *What's that I hear, I hear angels praising and saints shouting come up here. Paul goes up and the Lord says, “ Paul, well done, good and faithful servant.”* ” **He finished well.** In 1904, William Borden, a member of the Borden dairy family, finished high school in Chicago and was given a world cruise as a graduation present. While traveling through the Near East and the Far East, he became greatly burdened for the lost.

After returning home he spend seven years at Princeton University, the first four in undergraduate work and the last three in seminary. While in school, he penned these words in the back of his Bible. “ **No reserves.** ” Although his family pleaded with him to take control of the

business, which was struggling, he insisted that God's call to the mission field had priority. After disposing of his wealth, he added, “ **No retreat,** ” after the words “ **No reserves.** ” On his way to China to witness to Muslims there he contracted cerebral meningitis in Egypt and died within a month. After his death someone, looking through his Bible discovered these final words, “ **No regrets.** ” He knew that the Lord does not require success, only faithfulness. **Finishing Well.** How will you finish ? Will you finish like Borden, like Paul faithfully carrying out the Lord's command, “ *And ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem and in all Judea and in Samaria and unto the uttermost part of the earth.* ” (1:8) If you do that then when the day of your home call comes you'll be able to say, “ **No reserves, no retreat, no regrets ?** ”

