

Facing Times Of Stress: When God Is Silent (Part Four)

Paul's Witness in Rome

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Travel stories are interesting tales because they provide variety of both adventure and setting. They inevitably involve danger, risks, suspense, and testing, while bringing the traveler into encounters with unknown characters and customs.

In the Bible, travel usually brings a traveler into an encounter with God. It also produces change and growth and character, and the physical movement often provides new revelation and understanding. In a sense, the Bible is a collection of travel stories. Wherever we turn in the story sections of the Bible, we usually observe characters locally or internationally on a journey. The apostles are pictured as traveling more than a dozen times in the book of Acts alone and the epistles confirm their demanding travel.

The international missionary travels of Paul are the last of the major biblical travel stories since he and his companions visit nearly all the major cities of the Greco-Roman world of the time. The story has virtually all the ingredients that are possible in a travel story: adventure, excitement, suspense, danger, shipwreck, the exotic appeal of far away places, memorable encounters with individuals and groups, riots, arrests and imprisonments, trials, escapes and rescues.

The world of the Bible is a realistic world, thoroughly rooted in life as we know it, a quality that the travel stories highlight. Now, the Bible's emphasis on people busily traveling provides a greater descriptive quality, and the display of purposeful movement shows that life never stands still but is forward-moving even in its physical dimension, but in a positive way.

The biblical travel stories also take on an initial symbolic and spiritual meaning. Where, how, and why people travel is a guide to their spiritual state. And most biblical travelers are in transit for spiritual reasons, most notably, obedience to a call by God.

The framework of the second half of the book of Acts is, in its simplest form, a travel story. Turn with me, if you will please, to Acts 28. In this fourth and last sermon titled, "Facing Times of Stress: When God is Silent," regarding Paul's trials and travels on his way to Rome, we pick up the story as Paul the prisoner and the other travelers move on to Rome from Malta. They had spent three months on Malta because they were unable to sail further during the winter months. The shipwreck had taken place in November. That month had to pass, then all of December and January. So it was certainly well into February, perhaps even March, when the weather began to clear up sufficiently for ships to sail again.

Acts 28:11 After three months we sailed in an Alexandrian ship whose figurehead was the Twin Brothers, which had wintered at the island. [That is the island of Malta.]

The grain ship from Alexandria was wintering on the island, so the soldier in charge took space on that ship and the prisoners were carried forth on the next stage of their journey. Now, when we read the paragraph, beginning at verse 11, it seems almost as if Luke had a notebook in which he kept a log. His notes say that they put in first at Syracuse, the capital city of Sicily and the point of land that would have been closest to them if they were sailing north from Malta toward Rome.

Acts 28:12 And landing at Syracuse, we stayed three days.

Now, Syracuse had been founded as a Corinthian colony back in 734 BC so it had been around quite a few hundred years, but it had passed to Roman rule in 212 BC. It was a port city with a good double harbor. So this was an ancient city even by Paul's standards at that time. Next, the ship went to Rhegium, on the very tip of the toe of the boot of Italy. From there, helped forward by a strong southerly wind, it passed through the straits of Sicily with the island on the left and Italy on the right. The wind must have been a very good one because by the next day, they had covered nearly 200 miles by that ship from Rhegium to Puteoli, Rome's southern port.

Acts 28:13-14 From there we circled round and reached Rhegium. And after one day the south wind blew; and the next day we came

to Puteoli, where we found brethren, and were invited to stay with them seven days. And so we went toward Rome.

The long, tiring, and nearly fatal journey by sea was over and Luke records with a masterful, simple understatement, "And so we went toward Rome." And when they arrived on the mainland, word quickly spread that the apostle Paul had come.

Acts 28:15-16 And from there, when the brethren heard about us, they came to meet us as far as the Appii Forum and Three Inns. When Paul saw them, he thanked God and took courage. Now when we came to Rome, the centurion delivered the prisoners to the captain of the guard; but Paul was permitted to dwell by himself with the soldier who guarded him.

And we can assume, I think very wisely, that he and that soldier that had been guarding him all those months had become friends. The soldier was going to be responsible for Paul personally and had him stay with him.

So we remember that Paul had written to the Romans quite a few years before saying that it was his intention to come to Rome. And he seemed to have been preparing for his visit, asking for a good reception and carefully suggesting that the Roman Christians might help him with his plans to plant churches farther to the west in Spain. So Paul had planned this trip well in advance, years in advance.

Tired from his long sea voyage, Paul must have been anxious about how these believers would receive him. He was probably asking himself, would they even know that he had come. Immediately, it seems, Christians from Rome set off down the Appian Way to meet him. And Luke says that some made it as far as the Three Inns, others as far as the forum of Appius. There was about 10 miles separating them and there they greeted Paul, and Paul was encouraged.

Now, even though the Christian brothers and sisters in Rome meant a great deal to him, Paul still did not know for sure what was going to come, what was going to happen when he arrived. He knew people were in Rome, but he must have had concerns as to how he would be received. So when the

Christians in Rome came out to meet him, showing that they indeed cared about him, his emotional state must have perked up, especially after that long voyage that was so dangerous at times. His resulting joy must have put a spring in his step. You can just imagine that.

Please turn over to Philippians 1, verse 15. In contrast to this show of encouragement, remember that a few years later, when Paul was writing to the Philippians from his Roman imprisonment, he spoke of trouble among the Christians in Rome, noting that some of it was due to envy of himself.

Philippians 1:15-17 Some indeed preach Christ, even from envy and strife, and some from goodwill. The former preach Christ from selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing to add affliction to my chains; but the latter out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the gospel.

So later when he wrote II Timothy, the last of his letters, he referred to a man named Onesiphorus who came to him to visit him, but who was at first unable to find where Paul was. And so Paul wrote this of him in II Timothy 1, if you will turn there with me.

II Timothy 1:13-18 Hold fast the pattern of sound words which you have heard from me, in faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. That good thing which was committed to you, keep by the Holy Spirit who dwells in us. This you know, that all those in Asia have turned away from me, among whom are Phygellus and Hermogenes. [I always think of homogenized milk whenever I read that name.] The Lord grant mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, for he often refreshed me, and was not ashamed of my chain; but when he arrived in Rome, he sought me out very zealously and found me. The Lord grant to him that he may find mercy from the Lord in that Day—and you know very well how many ways he ministered to me at Ephesus.

So this Onesiphorus who found Paul eventually in Rome must have been a very close friend and Paul had great respect for him.

This suggests that although the Christians of Rome greeted Paul warmly when he first arrived, they soon lost track of him and were therefore unable to tell Onesiphorus where Paul was when he inquired. Now, when Paul first arrived, he was a celebrity, in a sense. Paul, the great apostle had arrived. The Christian streamed out to see him. But then this great apostle was imprisoned.

First, he was placed under house arrest where he had some freedom of motion and he could meet with his friends and those interested in the gospel of Christ. And at times, he may have been chained by his wrist to the Roman guard. Later, Paul seems to have lost his freedom, perhaps during a second imprisonment, and was locked away. And as time went by the Christians in Rome seemed to have forgotten about him, as people do.

Now, we must remember that people run hot and cold, but we must also remember how important encouragement can be and we should give it often to one another.

Here, Paul was in prison. You would certainly think that the apostle of the church would have received brethren visiting him on a regular basis. But as I mentioned earlier, people run hot and cold and in time, apathy set in.

There are many contrasts in the story of the voyage by ship from Caesarea, the arrival in Malta, and then finally, the arrival at Rome. Let me briefly mention the three greatest of them, at least from the perspective of this sermon.

First, *turmoil versus inner peace*. This contrast is between the turmoil without and Paul's quite evident peace within. They were tumultuous times and the storm was a literal tumult. But there was also the tumult of the crowd in Jerusalem. There was the tumult of the empire, things going from bad to worse. Yet through it all, Paul seems to have been at complete peace in Jesus Christ. And we have to also work at having that same peace—and it does take work. Paul had worked at that with God's help and the Holy Spirit for many, many years.

The second contrast is *vacillation versus consistency and steady progress*. This contrast is between the vacillation of others and the consistency and steady progress of Paul. When Paul fell into the hands of the Roman authorities, they hardly knew what to do with him. One ruler after another tried to decide what to do and kept vacillating. Even the voyage to Rome illustrates the uncertainty. There were three ships, delays, and a shipwreck. The thing that impresses us, if we take our eyes off these external matters and look at Paul, is that God was working with him steadily to bring him to Rome where he was to bear a witness. That kept him going steadily and forward moving.

The third contrast is *fear versus faith in God*. This contrast is between fear on the part of many and faith in God. On the part of the apostle Paul, there were all kinds of fears. Fear of what people would say, fear of what the Jewish leaders would do, fear of what Caesar might think, and there was fear of ridicule, fear of being thought ridiculous, not to mention fear of the storm and the death it threatened. Many kinds of fears were expressed. But throughout it all, Paul, who had his mind not on others but on God, was strong in faith and remained calm. I am sure there were times of a certain amount of anxiety. Who would not have that? After all, this was his fourth shipwreck, at least that we know of. Maybe he was just used to it. "Oh, here is another one." But I doubt that. I think we would all be anxious.

What made the difference was that Paul was aware that God was with him. He knew God had a purpose for him. If God said that he would bear a witness for Jesus in Rome, then Paul would most certainly bear witness in Rome. Paul was willing to rest his life on that.

Perhaps that is where the story should end and where the application should be most evidently made for us. We also live in a vacillating world, a world of dangers, and we live among people who are filled with fear and sometimes that fear rubs off on us. Right now this whole nation is in fear of what is going to happen with the elections, with the caravan that is not a caravan, but is actually an invasion, and other things like that. And they concern us as well as the world. We are called to be as Paul was in the midst of it, counting on God, resting in Him, and moving forward steadily to do the work He has called us to do.

Let us go back to Acts 28. As we come in this chapter to the end of Acts, we cannot help but realize that it is an extraordinary book by any standard. In Luke and Acts, Luke set out to chronicle the expansion of Christianity from a small beginning in Judea, a distant province in the Roman Empire, to its being a world religion and a force in many cities. And this was a tremendous responsibility in documenting this expansion. Luke succeeded in relating it to the events and personalities of the time. That is, he did not write a story that merely stands by itself, but rather one that constantly brings in many people who would be known to his contemporaries.

For example, he is the only one of the New Testament writers to mention a Roman emperor. None of the others do. And he mentions not only one emperor, he mentions three of them. He even alludes to a fourth, Nero, the emperor whom the apostle Paul appealed when being tried by Festus. And Luke refers to other personalities too. In almost every city Paul visited, Luke mentions the person who was the magistrate in charge. What is even more significant, not only does he allude to them by name and get their names right, he even gets their titles right in spite of the fact that these varied from place to place and changed from time to time.

We know that Luke was a physician and so he was very detail oriented; and so he recorded many details which also gives credibility to the Bible and to the writings of the writers of the Bible. Luke shows accurately in a way that would praise it to the readers of his time, the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ to infuse and eventually transform the world.

Acts 28:17-22 And it came to pass after three days that Paul called the leaders of the Jews together. So when they had come together, he said to them: "Men and brethren, though I have done nothing against our people or the customs of our fathers, yet I was delivered as a prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans, who, when they had examined me, wanted to let me go because there was no cause for putting me to death. But when the Jews spoke against it, I was compelled to appeal to Caesar, not that I had anything of which to accuse my nation. For this reason therefore I have called for you, to see you and speak with you, because for the hope of Israel I am bound with this chain." Then they said to him,

"We neither received letters from Judea concerning you, nor have any of the brethren who came reported or spoken any evil of you. But we desire to hear from you what you think; for concerning this sect, we know that it is spoken against everywhere."

So this is Paul's conversation with the Jewish leaders in Rome.

This extraordinary book of Acts also has an amazing ending. Have you ever come across a book that ended as this book does? It has been mainly concerned with the apostle Paul, his ministry, persecutions, successes, and imprisonment. But then at the very end, when we are expecting to learn how it all turned out, the story of Paul's life is abandoned and all we read is,

Acts 28:30-31 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 concerned the Lord Jesus Christ with all confidence, no one forbidding him.

It is not an ending that Luke merely threw in without thought. It is exactly the way God wanted Luke to end Paul's history because it was inspired. We know that God laid this out because no matter how fascinating we may find the histories of Peter and Philip, Paul, or any of those strong personalities who dominate the book, the subject of Luke's narrative is not the lives of these servants of God, but the gospel. Luke is concerned with how the gospel grew and expanded. So when we get to the very end of Acts, we find that this is happening.

Now Christianity had begun in Jerusalem with the commissioning of the disciples by Jesus Christ. And now, in the very heart of the capital of the Roman Empire, Paul is preaching. Luke tells us that in those days, for a period at least, the gospel was preached without hindrance. So it was being preached everywhere, and nobody was stopping it and many, many were listening to it.

There are all sorts of hindrances if we look at the situation only from a human point of view, and more would come. Persecution is a hindrance and Paul had experienced plenty of that. He had been beaten and stoned, falsely accused and arrested, and now he was in prison. He could not move about as

he might have wanted. There was opposition from Paul's own people, the Jews. There was indifference on the part of the Roman authorities. But in spite of these external hindrances, which were great, the gospel was not hindered because the Word of God cannot be bound. And this is one of the things that Luke shows throughout his book, throughout his account of Acts.

Now, when you and I talk to people about Jesus Christ, we are often conscious of the hindrances in us. We do not seem to have the answers to their questions. For example, we wish we could present the gospel more clearly and wisely, we wish we had more experience to draw from. And there are hindrances in the people too. They are hostile, out of touch, or indifferent. People do not want the gospel today any more than they wanted it in the days of Jesus Christ and Paul, especially in the Jewish areas.

Yet, in spite of these hindrances, the Word of God itself is not hindered. Our task is merely to make it known, knowing that the God for whom all things are possible will bless it since He has promised to do so. You do not have to turn there, you know it well, but Isaiah 55:11 says, "So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me void, but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it."

The last verses of Acts described two meetings the apostle Paul had with people in Rome. Three days after he arrived and got settled, he called the leaders of the various Jewish communities in the city together. There were several synagogues in Rome at the time, the remains of some of them exist even today. So we know that there were at least three and probably more than that. So Paul got in touch with the leaders of these synagogues because he wanted to explain why he was in Rome, what he had been charged with, and why the accusations had been false. He made three points in his meetings with these leaders.

The first point was that *he was not guilty of any offense against Israel.*

Acts 28:17 And it came to pass after three days that Paul called the leaders of the Jews together. So when they had come together, he said to them, "Men and brethren, though I have done nothing against our people or the customs of our fathers, yet I was delivered as a prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans."

Paul wanted that to be clear. It was true that the charges had been brought against him by the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem but he was not guilty of these or any other offenses and he wanted that to be clear.

The second point, *he wanted to make clear the Romans had been ready to release him and wanted to release him once again.*

Acts 28:18 who, when they had examined me, wanted to let me go, because there was no cause for putting me to death.

Here, he is talking about what the Romans would have considered a crime. In other words, he is making two points: 1) he had done nothing against his people. And 2) he had done nothing that could be could offend the Romans. As a matter of fact, the Romans would have released him if it were not for the objections of the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem.

And then the third thing that he wanted to make sure they understood was that *he had not brought a countercharge against the Jewish leaders, following Christ's example that when He was reviled He did not revile in return.*

Acts 28:19 "But when the Jews spoke against it, I was compelled to appeal to Caesar, not that I had anything of which to accuse my nation."

We can understand how that might have been done since it is a standard legal maneuver today in this world. If somebody sues you, you countersue immediately because you want to show that the other party is the guilty one rather than yourself. Paul says that he did not do this. He had not brought any charges against his own people.

So after Paul had made this presentation to the leading Jews of Rome, the leaders were very discreet. On the one hand, they denied that they heard anything about his case, which is hard to believe that this was true, but it must have been since they would have no reason for lying. It may have been that the Jerusalem authorities assumed that Paul would probably be released by the Romans in Rome and were content that at least he was now out of

their hair, that is, out of the hair of the Jews in Jerusalem, so they simply did not pursue with him their charges. But whatever the explanation may be, the Jewish leaders in Rome maintained that they did not know anything about Paul's case.

On the other hand, they said, we have heard something about the sect of the Nazarene and we must tell you quite frankly that what we have heard is not good. Well, said Paul, in effect, since this is what he was leading up to anyway, why do we not all get together some time and I will explain. That is generally the way the conversation went. These men agreed to do so and were very serious about it. They were responsible as well as distinguished leaders and they recognized that it was their duty to hear, examine, and make a judgment about this Christianity. They gave proof of their sincerity by setting a date for the larger meeting.

Now, more people came to the second meeting; that is, not only the leaders themselves but others who were distinguished in some way or perhaps even members from the various synagogues and Jewish communities in the city who were interested were at this second meeting. Paul preached the gospel and did it all day long. He had a lot to talk about. He began in the morning and went on until evening, declaring the Kingdom of God and revealing Jesus' divine identity.

Acts 28:23 So when they had appointed him a day, many came to him at his lodging, to whom he explained and solemnly testified of the kingdom of God, persuading them concerning Jesus from both the Law of Moses and the Prophets, from morning till evening.

So Paul would have taught as he did in other places. But in this company, he would have been questioned by the rabbis, who would have known the Old Testament well, and would have had very astute minds and very clever questions. If Paul gave a uniquely Christian interpretation of an Old Testament prophecy, they would have challenged it and pursued it only as rabbis can do. And this went on all day.

Nevertheless, although we do not have a record of it, it is not that difficult to surmise what might have been said since the very next book in the Bible, the book of Romans, which Paul had written just three years earlier to explain

the gospel to the same community, they may have followed the general outline of the book of Romans. He had already laid it out, sent it to Rome as a letter to the church, and he may have just used that as his outline to these Jewish leaders.

He would have begun by speaking of our obligation to know God and worship Him, to love Him with all our hearts, minds, souls, and strength. And this would have been a point of contact with these Jewish hearers because these obligations are what the Scriptures teach and that is what they knew. They knew the Old Testament Scriptures. Paul would have would also have pointed out that we have all fallen short of God's standard. He would have explained why, like he did in the early chapters of Romans (in the way of a paraphrase), "Gentiles have rejected the knowledge of God," and he would have said, "but we Jews have missed it too. We have substituted our own righteousness for God's righteousness, forgetting the matters of faith and trust which are so prominent in the Old Testament. We have substituted ceremonies for a heartfelt relationship with God."

Paul must have continued by saying, so you see, it is not a question of being a Jew or a Gentile. We are all sinners.

Romans 3:10-11 "As it is written, there is none righteous, no, not one; there is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God."

Those words are not only in Romans, they are found twice in the book of Psalms, which the rabbis would have known.

Psalms 14:3 They have all turned aside, they have together become corrupt; there is none who does good, no, not one.

And then this is repeated for emphasis in,

Psalms 53:3 Every one of them has turned aside; they have together become corrupt; there is none who does good, no, not one.

Those rabbis that Paul was preaching to knew these scriptures and they would have recognized it. So his audience would have known these texts and the words would echo in their minds.

And then Paul would have gone on to talk about Jesus, the hope of Israel. He would have proclaimed the Messiah as having come. And this is the point at which he would have gotten opposition. They would have said, Certainly we are expecting the Messiah but not as the despised Nazarene. Paul would have gone to the many Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah and would have shown how Jesus fulfilled these prophecies. The Jews were looking for a day when God would re-establish Israel as the dominant chosen nation. And Paul would have shown that before that happened, it was necessary for the Messiah to sacrifice Himself to provide salvation for all the people.

At this point, the Jews began to disagree among themselves.

Acts 28:24-25 And some were persuaded by the things which were spoken, and some disbelieved. So when they did not agree among themselves, they departed after Paul had said one word: "The Holy Spirit spoke rightly through Isaiah the prophet to our fathers, . . .

Some of them believed Paul, apparently convinced by this reasoning. Most did not. The negative reaction was so strong that Paul was inspired to cite the text from Isaiah 6:10 here.

Acts 28:26-27 . . . saying, 'Go to this people and say: "Hearing you will hear, and shall not understand; and seeing you will see, and not perceive; for the hearts of this people have grown dull. Their ears are hard of hearing, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, lest they should understand with their hearts and turn, so that I should heal them."'

So this is what Paul was saying to the rabbis and they would have recognized it. Paul was accustomed to this reaction and had done the same thing before. Three times before, stubborn Jewish opposition stimulated Paul to turn to the

Gentiles—in Pisidian Antioch, in Corinth, and in Ephesus. And now for the fourth time in the world's capital city and in an even more decisive manner, he does it again.

Acts 28:28-29 "Therefore let it be known to you that the salvation of God had been sent to the Gentiles, and they will hear it!" And when he had said these words, the Jews departed and had a great dispute among themselves.

For Paul, this must have been an enormous challenge. He was a Jew himself and Jesus was the Jew's Messiah. And here, most of them flat-out rejected it and turned their back on Him. He was probably very hopeful, but then the reality set in. Jesus had done what was prophesized about Him in the Old Testament Scriptures. The Jews were commissioned by God to protect and preserve the Holy Scriptures. They knew what they said.

The apostles had proclaimed the gospel, but for the most part the Jews were rejecting the message. How could that be? How could it be that the Messiah of Israel was rejected by Israel? Did it mean that God had cast off His people? Did Jewish unbelief show that God was being unfaithful to the promises He had made to Israel?

Well, please turn with me to Romans 9. In Romans chapters 9 through 11, Paul carefully worked out the answer to this problem. First, he says that no one is ever saved except by the electing grace of God.

Romans 9:6-11 But it is not that the word of God has taken no effect. For they are not all Israel who are of Israel, nor are they all children because they are the seed of Abraham; but, "In Isaac your seed shall be called." That is, those who are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God; but the children of the promise are counted as the seed. For this is the word of promise: "At this time I will come and Sarah shall have a son." And not only this, but when Rebecca also had conceived by one man, even by our father Isaac (for the children not yet being born, not having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works but of Him who calls), . . .

Romans 9:14-16 What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? Certainly not! For He says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion." So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy.

The choice is always with God. So if God elects many Jews at one period of history but not at another, and many Gentiles at still a different period of history, well, that is God's will. Salvation is never guaranteed simply by being Jewish or by any other line of descent.

Second, the rejection of the Messiah by a large portion of Israel had been prophesized in the Old Testament.

Romans 9:19-20 You will say to me then, "Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will?" But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to Him who formed it, "Why have you made me like this?"

This meant that the Jewish unbelief should not have been unexpected. Paul quotes from Isaiah 10:22-23 and Isaiah 1:9 to show that only a remnant of the nation would be saved initially.

Third, although it had been prophesized that a majority would reject the Messiah when He came, the rejection nevertheless would be the unbelievers' fault. Why is that? Because they would pursue salvation without faith and by means of their own righteousness, rejecting the righteousness of God. In other words, the Jews of Paul's day wanted God to praise them for how well they were doing. And that is exactly the error people of all ethnic backgrounds also make today. They do not want grace from God. They want to achieve salvation by themselves.

Fourth, although most of the Jews were rejecting Jesus, not all were doing so. Two chapters later in,

Romans 11:1-5 I say then, has God cast away His people?
Certainly not! For I also am an Israelite of the seed of Abraham, of

the tribe of Benjamin. God has not cast away His people whom He foreknew. Or do you not know what the scripture says of Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel saying, "Lord, they have killed Your prophets and torn down Your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life?" But what does the divine response say to him? "I have reserved for Myself seven thousand men who have not bowed their knee to Baal." Even so then, at this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace.

Some had believed, and Paul cites himself as an example. I am an Israelite myself, he says.

Fifth, this is not new. It has always been this way. Even in the days of Elijah, only 7,000 Israelites remained faithful to God, the rest had become apostate. You will find that even discussed by Paul in Romans 11:2-10.

Sixth, although God is moving among Gentiles in a great way in this age, even this is for Israel's good. You find that mentioned in Romans 11:11-24.

Paul speaks of the conversion of the Gentiles as provoking Jews to jealousy. This was intended to lead some of them to consider the case for Jesus being the Messiah and thus eventually believe in Him.

Seventh, in the end, all Israel will be saved. You find that discussed in Romans 11:22-32. And that means that there will be a future time of great national blessing for Israel when the masses of the Israelites will turn to their Messiah.

It has been said that God never closes one door in our lives, but that He opens another one. Through our own experience we all sense that that is accurate. God closes one door but He opens another. In fact, He did that for us at the Feast. He closed the door in Nashville, the Embassy Suites, and He opened another one at the Doubletree in Myrtle Beach. To me, it is the most obvious because I was the one working on it. But I assure you, that was the case.

This happened here, that is, God closes one door but opens another. The door to the Jewish community was closing. Not many Jews believed, but the door

was opening to the Gentiles. As Paul himself said, "the salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles and they will hear it." It is with the recognition of this truth that Acts ends. As long as that door was open, Paul was going to preach through it to the Gentiles.

Turn over to Galatians 3, verse 26 please. Acts ends as it does because throughout this age until Jesus Christ returns, the door is open to those whom God calls.

Galatians 3:26-28 For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

So Paul contrasted the position of a justified sinner with what he had been under the penalty of the law. And he states two significant things here.

First, all who believe in Christ become sons of God. The change in person from the first to the second (you) indicates that Paul turned from looking at Israel as a nation to address the Galatian believers as part of a spiritual Family. The exalted position of sons of God is a living union with Christ brought about by living, by being baptized into Christ, and receiving the Holy Spirit, which according to Paul in I Corinthians 12:12-13 joins all believers to Christ and unites them within the church, Christ's Body. This union with Him means being clothed with Christ. So it is a very permanent, very tight union.

Second, believers are all one in Christ Jesus. Since all believers became one with each other, human distinctions lose their significance. None is spiritually superior over another. That is, a believing Jew is not more privileged before God than a believing Gentile. Paul cut across these distinctions and stated that they do not exist in the Body of Christ so far as spiritual privilege and position are concerned.

Now elsewhere, while affirming the coequal of men and women in Christ, Paul did nonetheless make it clear that there is a kind and caring relationship of the husband over the wife and that there are distinctions in the area of

spiritual service. *Luke's "The Acts of the Apostles," provides us with the confidence that the same gospel, with the same results, assured that God's plan produced an unaltered gospel and founding of the church. This is important.*

The gospel Paul preached in Acts 28 is the same gospel preached by Peter in Acts 2. It was not a different gospel because it was being preached to different people by a different person or in a different setting.

No matter who is preaching or where, it must always be the same gospel. It is the gospel of salvation through Jesus Christ and of the coming Kingdom of God. It is the same gospel today.

The results of the preaching of that gospel are the same. Some reject it and some respond to it.

It was that way when Peter preached at Pentecost, it was that way when Paul preached at Rome, and it was that way when we teach the gospel of Jesus Christ today. We are not to think that if we experience rejection or resistance, that we are any different from those who preceded us.

Christ planned for the expansion of the gospel and the founding of His church has not altered.

As Acts closes, the Great Commission is being fulfilled. We may be frustrated by what we see as the slow progress of the gospel. But Jesus is not frustrated. His plans are not sidetracked. They are going exactly according to God's Plan.

Now turn with me back to Acts 28, verse 30. We come now to the very end of the book of Acts. Have you ever noticed that although the book of Acts preserves the history of the early New Testament church, it ends in the middle of the story?

Acts 28:30-31 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 concerned the Lord Jesus Christ with all confidence, no one forbidding him.

At the end of that two year period during which no accusers appeared, Paul would automatically have been released according to Roman law. Luke does not write about what happened to the apostle Paul after this because he was not with Paul then, and because he wants the book to close on this open optimistic note.

Let us turn back several chapters to Acts 9, verse 13. So what did happen to the apostle Paul after this? We find the answer in Christ's commission to Paul. Even before Paul was baptized, Christ had planned the future work he was to accomplish. First, Paul was to teach the Gentiles, which he did in Cyprus, Asia Minor, and Greece. Second, he was to appear before kings, an event brought about by a two-year imprisonment at Rome. But Paul's third mission was not yet accomplished as of the end of Acts. Christ chose Paul for a threefold purpose.

Acts 9:13-15 Then Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man [Saul], how much harm he has done to Your saints in Jerusalem. And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name." But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel."

There is the answer in verse 15. He was to end his work among the lost 10 tribes of Israel. Luke was not permitted by Christ to include in Acts the final journeys of Paul's life because it would have revealed the whereabouts of the 10 lost tribes of Israel. But it was not God's time to make that known then. And it was not to be known where the original 12 apostles went until the time of the end, our time today, when such things could be traced historically.

The last books Paul wrote were the Pastoral epistles, II Timothy especially, and he seems to refer to things in those books that may not have happened in

the historical time frame Luke presents in Acts. Paul may have traveled to the West. He may have gotten to Spain. He seems to have gone to Crete. Church tradition is that Paul returned to Rome after the great fire of AD 64. And there was such an outcry from the people because of this fire that Nero blamed it on the Christians. Eusebius says that Paul came back shortly after that in a time of hostility toward Christians, was arrested, and eventually was martyred.

But from God's perspective and from the perspective of the book of Acts, there is a sense in which it does not really matter. What happens to His servants does matter to God.

Psalm 116:15 Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints.

We matter. The apostles mattered. The prophets mattered. Everyone who is a member of God's church and part of the Family of God matters. What happens to *you* matters to Him.

But there is a sense also in which what happens to us is incidental to the greater story, which is the expansion of the gospel. At one period of history, there may be a great moving of God's Spirit when many are called and everything will seem to be going well. At other times times more like our own, the response to spiritual things will be superficial or people will be hostile. But in a sense, it does not matter because God's plan is being carried out just as He wants it to be in every way. What does matter is whether we are faithful in the calling to which God has called us. Jesus Christ told His disciples in,

Matthew 24:14 "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all nations, and then the end will come."

That end has not yet come as you well know, so you and I still have the task of witnessing and teaching it. That is the final lesson for us from Acts; the Word is not hindered. We are its messengers and God will bless it to the praise of the glory of His grace.

Please turn with me to I Kings 18, as we begin to wrap this sermon and series up with a word about when God is silent. Now, Elijah had been used by God to hold back rain from the land for over three years because of Israel's sins and he became a man on the run because of this. And we can only imagine the stress he experienced during those years. There is one statement in the Bible that seems to further complicate Elijah's situation. So consider this. This is part of Elijah's message to Ahab.

I Kings 18:1 And it came to pass after many days that the word of the Lord came to Elijah, in the third year, saying, "Go, present yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain on the earth."

Now, according to the New Testament, this "after many days" was 3½ years. And for this 3½ years of the famine, the people apparently continued to sin and Elijah continued to hold on by faith. But God said nothing and God seemed inactive, not speaking even to His servant Elijah, who was carrying out His will. Has God ever been inactive in your life? Has the silence of God in your life ever been unnervingly strong? And what should you do when God is silent? Possibly these were the some of the questions Elijah was asking himself.

First, realize that *silence is not an absence of action*. Just because God is silent, it does not mean He is idle. During the Intertestamental period, a 400-year gap between the ministry of the prophet Malachi and John the Baptizer, God was quiet, but preparing the world to receive His son.

Galatians 4:4 But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law.

Elijah did not sin as a way of life, but the Israelites were living in sin as a way of life—and sin hinders man's relationship with God.

Now experienced Christians know that some of the biggest moves God has made in their life have come after a period of what feels like spiritual dryness. So more so than ever, we must stay very close to God and patiently watch for and acknowledge His blessings, whether small or great. We have to make sure that we try to see blessings and miracles as much as possible in our lives, no matter how small or great.

You remember the adage, "The darkest hour is just before the dawn." But when you are feeling your worst, when all seems lost, and all hope seems to be gone, have hope in God's promises because things will improve. It is natural to feel down when any trial hits you, whether in sickness, financial difficulty, or relationship problems. We hope for a speedy resolution. But as it says,

Proverbs 13:12 Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but when the desire comes, it is a tree of life.

It is not actually hope that is deferred, but the object hoped *for*. In other words, it is good for a person to have hope, but if it is not fulfilled for a long time, then a person experiences disappointment and discouragement. But when a hope is fulfilled, a person is refreshed. And so the gratification of hope gives encouragement like a tree that gives life.

Lamentations 3:26 It is good that one should hope and wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.

Not only are we to hope, but we are to be *patient*. We are to wait quietly.

Romans 5:5 Now hope [and I add "in spiritual things"] does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

Now turn over to I Samuel 2, verse 17, please. A second thing that we should do when God is silent is *confront and overcome sins in our life*. In Old Testament times, priests were mediators between God and man. But when Eli's sons sinned, their relationship with God was severed and God stopped speaking to His people.

I Samuel 2:17 Therefore the sin of the young men was very great before the Lord, for men abhorred the offering of the Lord.

I Samuel 2:22-25 Now Eli was very old; and he heard everything his sons did to all Israel, and how they lay with the women who

assembled at the door of the tabernacle of meeting. So he said to them, "Why do you do such things? For I hear of your evil dealings from all the people. No, my sons! For it is not a good report that I hear. You make the Lord's people transgress. If one man sins against another, God will judge him. But if a man sins against the Lord, who will intercede for him?" Nevertheless they did not heed the voice of their father, because the Lord desired to kill them.

So if we do not deal with our sins, God will. And although He may be silent now, He will eventually break His silence to deal with the sinner. Confront yourself, confess to God, and turn back to Him before He breaks His silence and disciplines you, or worse, sends His wrath.

The third thing we should do when God is silent is *trust God regardless of the circumstances, and always*. Although Elijah's situation had grown from bad to worse, he did not disobey God. He obeyed Him by not wavering in his faith.

Times of silence can be frightening and so requires more faith. Not the faith that changes situations, but the faith that obeys even when your life is threatened.

We cannot have firsthand experience with God all the time. But we can trust and obey Him even when He is silent. And by doing this we will have hope in His ability to give an abundance of blessings from heavenly places.

Psalm 71:14 But I will hope continually, and will praise You yet more and more.

For a final scripture, if you will, turn with me to Job 11, verse 13. There are many great miracles, but one of the greatest miracles is in what we are led to do during times when miracles seem nowhere to be found. That miracle is the miracle of faith, having the faith of Jesus Christ to know that God fulfills all His promises to us, His spiritual children. One of the greatest of those promises is, "I will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not fear nor be dismayed." That is a promise that we have; God's people have that promise guaranteed. It is an assurance, but we have our responsibility to do in this covenant relationship.

Job 11:13-19 "If you would prepare your heart, and stretch out your hands toward Him [toward God]; if iniquity were in your hand, and you put it far away [meaning you repent of your sins], and would not let wickedness dwell in your tents; then surely you could lift up your face without spot; yes, you could be steadfast, and not fear; because you would forget your misery, and remember it as waters that have passed away [water under a bridge], and your life would be brighter than noonday. Though you were dark, you would be like the morning. And you would be secure, because there is hope. Yes, you would dig around you, and take your rest in safety. You would also lie down, and no one would make you afraid; yes, many would court your favor."

So God is never really silent in the lives of His children. He is always with us, dwelling in us through His Holy Spirit. And Jesus Christ is right there, mediating for us and interceding for us. It is a win-win situation for any member of God's church, any member of the Family of God. And we have that assurance in those promises, some of which I mentioned.

May you face times of stress fearlessly with God's assurance of hope!