

"ROME AT LAST" (Acts 27:1-28:31)

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Rome, the largest and most splendid of ancient cities, acted like a magnet to its peoples. For Rome was the capital and symbol of the Roman Empire, whose founding has been called "the grandest political achievement ever accomplished."¹ Rome presided magisterially over the whole known world. It treated its conquered subjects and their religions with comparatively humane tolerance; it somehow managed to integrate Romans, Greeks, Jews, and "Barbarians" into its social life; it protected the Greek culture and language; it inculcated respect for the rule of law; it gained a reputation for efficient administration and postal communication; and it facilitated travel by its ambitious system of roads and ports, policed by its legions and its navy, so preserving for the benefit of all the long-standing *pax romana*. No wonder people came from far and wide to see the great city from which these blessings emanated! Its buildings were famous—the three circuses and their daring chariot-races, the palaces of the Caesars, the tombs of the illustrious dead, the temples (especially the Pantheon erected by Augustus), the basilicas, theaters, baths and aqueducts, and particularly the bustling forum, the hub of the city's commercial, social, political, and religious life.

So Paul longed to visit Rome. True, Seneca had called it "a cesspool of iniquity" and Juvenal "a filthy sewer", and Paul himself described this moral decadence near the beginning of his Letter to the Romans,² but all the more urgently did it need the gospel. True, John in the book of Revelation portrayed Rome as a persecuting monster and as "the mother of prostitutes and of the abominations of the earth"³ but he was writing at least twenty years after Domitian's reign; Nero at the time of Paul's visit had not yet exposed his ugly cruelty. True again, Paul was "Hebrew of the Hebrews," who went from Tarsus to Jerusalem to study, but, having inherited Roman citizenship from his father, he must have dreamed since childhood of visiting the city for himself.

We do not know how, or how early, the gospel reached Rome and a church was planted there. Luke has told us that the Jerusalem crowd on the Day of Pentecost included some "visitors from Rome" (2:10). Perhaps some of them were converted at that time and then took the gospel home with them. At all events, some twenty-five years later Paul was able to address to the church in Rome his great manifesto of the gospel, and when eventually he approached the city, some church members came out to meet him (28:15). If only Rome could be thoroughly evangelized, he must often have thought to himself, and its church enlarged, consolidated, and fired with a missionary vision, what a radiating centre for the gospel it could become! "To a Roman the city of Rome was the centre of the world; from the golden milestone in the



¹ S. Angus' article, "Roman Empire", in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, first edition 1915, ed. James Orr.

² Romans 1:22ff.

³ Revelation 13:1ff.; 17:1ff.

Forum at Rome roads went out in all directions to all parts of the Empire."⁴

So in the Letter to the Romans Paul expressed his anxiety to visit the city and its church. Near the beginning of his letter he told them that he was praying that now at last the way would open for him to visit them⁵, for he longed to see them in order that he might strengthen them and that he and they might be mutually encouraged.⁶ Indeed, he had planned many times to visit them in order to reap a harvest among them, but had thus far been prevented.⁷ So now he was eager to preach the gospel to them in Rome.⁸ Then towards the end of his letter he reverted to the same theme. His ambition was to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, in order not to build on somebody else's foundation. That was why he had been hindered from coming to them.⁹ But now that Greece had been evangelized, there was no more room for him in those regions. And since he had been longing for many years to see them, he was hoping and planning to visit them on his way to Spain.¹⁰ First, he had to go to Jerusalem to deliver the collection he had been organizing. But once that task was accomplished, he was confident that he would come to them with Christ's full blessing.¹¹ So he urged them to join him in his struggle by praying for him both that his service to God's people in Jerusalem might be accepted and that afterwards by God's will he might reach them with joy.¹² What Paul wrote to the Romans was extremely personal: "I pray . . . I long . . . I am eager . . . I plan . . . I hope . . . I urge. . .". And it was all self-consistent. His hoping, longing and eagerness became a plan and then a prayer, in which he asked them to join him. The thought of this visit meant so much to him that he must have shared it with Luke and other friends. Rome dominated the horizon.

In fact, Luke appears deliberately to arrange his material in both his Gospel and the Acts in order to highlight what Floyd V. Filson has called "the journey motif." Two-fifths of the Gospel describe Jesus' journey from Galilee to Jerusalem¹³, and the final one-third of Acts describes Paul's journey from Jerusalem to Rome (19:21-28:31). In this way Luke indicates that Jerusalem and its temple are not indispensable to the church. "It would capture the essential geographical outlook of Luke to entitle the Gospel of Luke "From Galilee to Jerusalem" and the Book of Acts "From to Jerusalem to Rome," for Jerusalem was the goal of Jesus' ministry, while Rome was the goal of Paul's.¹⁴ Although the journeys of Jesus and Paul differed from one another in their ultimate direction and destination, they also resembled one another in their pattern, for both included a resolute determination, an arrest, a series of trials in Jewish and Roman courts, and even death and resurrection. For Paul's descent into the darkness and danger of the storm was a kind of grave, while his rescue from shipwreck and later springtime voyage to Rome were a kind of resurrection. Luke's highest apology for Paul was to portray him as "so conformed to the life of the Lord that even his sufferings and deliverance are parallel."¹⁵

⁴ From Floyd V. Filson's essay, "The Journey Motif in Luke-Acts, in Gasque and Martin, p. 76.

⁵ Romans 1:10.

⁶ Romans 1:11-12.

⁷ Romans 1:13.

⁸ Romans 1:15.

⁹ Romans 15:20-22.

¹⁰ Romans 15:23-24.

¹¹ Romans 15:25-29.

¹² Romans 15:30-32.

¹³ Luke 9:51-19:44.

¹⁴ Floyd V. Filson in Gasque and Martin, p. 75.

¹⁵ Rackham, pp. 477-478.