

“When Things Don’t Go As Planned”

Romans 15:22-24, Acts 28:11-16; Philippians 1:12-14



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*“We came to Puteoli...and then to Rome
... with a soldier guarding Paul”
(Acts 28:13, 14, 16)*

Today’s sermon is a bit different. Decades ago while leading a pilgrimage to Greece ‘in the footsteps of St. Paul’ we came to Philippi. There a sermon series was born based on the cities where Paul ministered.

As our personal travels have crossed Paul’s missionary path, I’ve added to that growing and extending series. So, I invite you to reflect today on a city you may not have heard of – the port city of Puteoli.

We visited there a few weeks ago during our travels in Italy. Paul did not establish the church in Puteoli, nor did he write them a letter. But this city had significance for Paul and can still impact our faith today.



Puteoli is not on the ‘Grand Tour.’ In fact, you can’t even find it on a map these days. What you do find is Pozzuoli, the modern equivalent of the ancient name. But it’s still not a popular site.

It forms a western suburb of Naples, or as the Italians pronounce it Napoli, located about a hundred and thirty miles south of Rome. Many tourists today avoid Naples altogether. Although it is being restored, the city is still crowded, crime infested and graffiti stained.

We would not have bothered with it ourselves, except for one thing. Puteoli was the major harbor on the west coast of Italy in the heyday of the Roman Empire.

Moreover, it was the port where the apostle Paul first landed on Italian soil heading for Rome – *not as a missionary traveler, but as a Roman prisoner*. In great part that’s what makes Puteoli important. It presses upon us the question, ‘What are we to do when things don’t go as planned?’

Paul's Final Journey

For many years Paul had planned to visit Rome.

His trip to that center of the ancient world forms the conclusion of Paul's missionary activity in the Bible. Luke, the author of *Acts*, uses the last nine chapters of his book to describe Paul's final push toward Rome.

Let me try and put this literary fact a bit more graphically. Paul's final journey – the one to Rome – occupies over 25% of the entire *Book of Acts*. Luke gives more attention to this single journey than to all the other three missionary journeys of Paul put together.

Why was this account so important for Luke? Why did he report it with such meticulous care? Clearly, Luke believed Paul's journey to Rome was the final step in the spread of the gospel, first "*in Jerusalem*," then "*in all Judea and Samaria*," and finally "*to the ends of the earth*" (*Acts* 1:8).

Luke confirms that Paul was collecting an offering from among the Gentile churches in Greece to send to the poverty stricken Jewish church in Jerusalem. In *Acts* chapter 20 Paul begins heading for Jerusalem determined to deliver personally this gift from Gentile Christians.

After arriving in Jerusalem, however, a group of radical Jewish patriots hostile to Paul and his message started a riot aimed at lynching the apostle. He was rescued by the Romans who occupied Jerusalem. Thereafter, Paul set about to clear his name before the Jewish Sanhedrin, the Roman governors Felix and Festus, and the puppet King, Herod Agrippa.

On each occasion Paul seized the opportunity not simply to defend himself, but to preach the gospel. At one point he was thrown into prison in Caesarea for two years. Finally, insisting upon his right as a Roman citizen to receive a fair trial, Paul appealed to Caesar.

Unfortunately the Caesar to whom Paul appealed was named Nero.

Luke's story of Paul's harrowing journey to Rome includes the most graphic account in the entire Bible (if not all of ancient literature!) of

storm and shipwreck at sea. Read this dramatic account for yourself in Acts chapter 27.

The storm marooned Paul on the Island of Malta for three months during a winter early in the 60s A.D. Early the next year an Egyptian cargo ship carried Paul and his companions on toward Rome under the watchful eye of Julius, the Centurion guard charged with getting Paul to Rome.

The ship passed through the narrow three-mile wide strait separating the toe of Italy from Sicily. Then the boat swept northward running hard before a strong southern wind. In two days they reached the crescent-shaped harbor of Puteoli – the Roman Empire’s largest port on the coast of Italy.

A Coveted Destination

Today this ancient harbor-town’s best known celebrity is Sophia Loren! The local inhabitants seemed far more eager to show us the neighborhood where she grew up than to identify the ancient port area where the apostle Paul first came ashore two thousand years earlier!

But Jan and I are inveterate explorers. After a bit of searching we came upon a small church on the shoreline of that ancient harbor. On its walls inscribed in Italian were these words:

*Paul of Tarsus apostle to the Gentiles
The great proclaimer of truth
Landed on the beach of Puteoli
Here he stayed seven days
With his brothers in the faith*

Having disembarked at Puteoli, Luke announces enthusiastically “*and so we came to Rome*” (Acts 28:14). This was a bit premature, there being yet 130 miles of tough overland hiking to reach the capital city. But for Paul Rome was finally within sight.

Many believers in the Roman church knew of Paul. Getting word of his impending arrival they hurried south of Rome on the Apian Way about thirty or forty miles. There they greeted the captive apostle and

escorted him into the city of Rome – Paul’s coveted destination.

But arriving in chains and under guard was not what Paul had envisioned for his arrival in Rome. In *Romans*, Paul’s ‘letter of introduction,’ the apostle sketched a quite different scenario.

“I know that when I come to you, I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ” (15:29). *“For I am longing to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you”* (1:11). *“I desire, as I have for many years, to come to you when I go to Spain. For I do hope to see you on my journey and be sent on by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a little while”* (15:23-24).

Paul envisioned a time of celebration in Rome, a time when he and the Christians there would share their faith together, a time when he might receive encouragement for his planned missionary trip to Spain.

Now this! Paul was tethered to a Roman guard, his freedom gone, his future uncertain. He was a prisoner, held under house arrest and awaiting a doubtful outcome in his audience before Nero.

The Intrusion of the Unplanned

This was *not* what Paul had planned. For just that reason it presses home the question I found myself asking as we explored the ancient harbor city of Puteoli – ‘What are we to do when things don’t go as planned?’

It’s a good question, because things rarely work out just as we plan.

Marriages start with a promise of joy and personal fulfillment, but half of them break up angrily and tear apart. Children arrive and we hope they will be a blessing – and many are, but many are not. Sometimes even the planned prize of retirement turns out to be vacuous and unsatisfying.

Things do not always turn out the way we plan – either for us or for the apostle. Paul was driven by a missionary passion, but ended up locked down inside a room. What are we to do when things turn out this way?

My grandfather served for years as a missionary in India and Japan. Later he was the pastor of a strong mission-centered church in St. Louis. Through Grandpa's strong preaching and spiritual enthusiasm that congregation supported missionaries all around the globe.

Then Parkinson's intruded. It cut down Grandpa's strong body until in the end he was debilitated and confined to a bed. On a visit with him many years ago, I pulled up a chair close to his bedside and asked, "Grandpa, how do you spend your time?"

His eyes lit up and he whispered in a voice once strong but now frail and raspy, "Paul, I pray my way around the world twice a day!"

Grandpa's plan had been to support missionaries through vigorous preaching and dynamic church outreach. But his plan was cut short. Oh, the goal of missionary support was certainly in harmony with God's purpose. But the means of accomplishing that goal shifted for Grandpa.

When things don't go as planned, faith opens our minds to God's plan – a divine purpose whose scope and scheme are often not immediately clear.

Few had any idea what went on with the old bed-ridden gentleman who lived in that small house in an Illinois town of 900. But a little bed and a small house and a crushing disease could not quench Grandpa's spirit. Even Parkinson's proved no obstacle to being faithful in prayer.

Grandpa was freed to orbit the earth twice a day in obedience to Christ's command, "*Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, to send forth laborers into his harvest*" (Mt. 9:38 KJV).

God is Working His Purpose Out

As I scampered around the ruins of the ancient port of Puteoli thinking about Paul landing there not as missionary but as a prisoner, it came to me. God's purposes are not jeopardized when our plans don't work out.

It is not God's job to fulfill our plans. It's our job to fulfill His.

God planned for Paul to be a missionary for Christ. Whether his witness was borne in Spain or in prison was inconsequential. Although Paul was not free to preach Christ abroad, it says, he “*welcomed all who came to him...teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness*” (Acts 28:31).

To put it simply, Paul had planned to preach to one congregation, but God gave him another. In a letter he wrote from that Roman prison, Paul explained to the Philippian church:

“What has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel throughout the whole imperial guard!” Then Paul ended his letter with a smile and, I think, a twinkle. *“All the saints here in Rome greet you especially those of the emperor’s household”* (Phil 1:12-13 & 4:22).

Things may not always work out just as you and I plan, but that does not mean God’s purposes are shaken. Faith keeps alive our confidence that:

*God is working His purpose out
As year succeeds to year*



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