

Paul's Missionary Journeys

Acts 13 - 28

The call to Philip to meet the Ethiopian official and to Peter to visit Cornelius appear to have been one-off events. Nevertheless, each one brought the gospel to a wider group of people as a result of the Holy Spirit's initiative. In Antioch, in a church already made up of a people from a wide spectrum of backgrounds, the Holy Spirit called Barnabas and Saul (Paul) to travel with the deliberate policy of preaching the good news and establishing new Christian churches (Acts 13:1-3).

Since this was the first time anything like this had taken place, Paul and Barnabas had to work out their policy and methods as they went along. Persecution from the Jews meant they were obliged to move on frequently, leaving small groups of believers behind them to carry on the Christian witness in each place. These new churches needed local leaders, who were appointed by Paul and Barnabas themselves (Acts 14:23). As founding fathers, the apostles would retain a sense of overall authority over the churches they had brought into being. But because in practice they could not be with the churches, the local leaders had a good deal of autonomy.

There was also a need for continued teaching, especially where the apostles were not in a place long enough to pass on all they would have liked or where problems arose after they left. This gave rise to another creative development in the life of the Church - epistles from the apostles to particular churches. Those to the Thessalonians, for example, were written to both teach and encourage a new and struggling church. The First Letter to the Corinthians gives advice and correction on a range of pastoral concerns.

However, because Paul was in very loose touch with his churches, it was easy for misunderstanding and even conflict to arise. In Galatia, after Paul had left, other preachers from Judaea began undermining his good name and preaching a different version of the gospel. The Letter to the Galatians expresses both his indignation and concern. The Letter to the Romans carefully explains his understanding of the gospel prior to his visit to Rome, to allay suspicion among some of the churches there about the content of his message. In Corinth as well as in Galatia Paul's authority and credibility were challenged by other Christian preachers and 2 Corinthians

reflects the breakdown of Paul's pastoral relationship with the church, undermined by these "false apostles".

From the first, then, the New Testament Church faced doctrinal and pastoral problems and the idea of a golden age of Christianity from which the churches of the present have fallen is a mistake. The perennial human failings of the early Christians, especially pride and selfishness, repeatedly caused Paul and his travelling team both heartache and suffering. Nevertheless, the book of Acts expresses Luke's optimism and faith in the working of the Holy Spirit. It is the story of the spread of the gospel from Jerusalem to the capital of the empire in Rome, and there are hints that the gospel will continue to spread even further until it comes to the whole world. With all his experience of disappointment and disillusion, Paul still affirmed, "It is the power of God for salvation to all who believe" (Romans 1:16).

In this section of Word of Life, we trace the story of Paul's journeys with his fellow workers as told by Luke in Acts 13 - 28 and include with it the letters he wrote while travelling before his arrival in Rome.

Day 146. Psalm 31; Acts 13 - 14

The First Missionary Journey

Psalm 31

The writer thanks God for defending him against his enemies in time of trial.

Acts 13 - 14

The Church in Syrian Antioch included both Jews and Gentiles (11:19-26), and its leadership team of teachers and prophets was drawn from a wide mix of peoples and backgrounds. The discipline of common worship, prayer and fasting enabled them to maintain the unity which the Spirit gives and it was in this setting of discipline and unity that the Holy Spirit was able to speak, presumably through a prophet, the words which set the Church on in its next decisive step forward.

Embarked on deliberate mission for the first time, Paul's strategy was to go to the Jews first (Romans 1:16) since they were the inheritors of the covenant and had first right to the grace of God (Romans 9:4-5). Only when the Jews refused, did he go deliberately to the Gentiles (13:46-47; 28:17,23-28). Nevertheless, as early as Cyprus Paul and Barnabas found themselves speaking in front of the Roman governor and engaged in a power encounter with the spiritual forces of evil which were behind the sorcerer Elymas. It was the evident spiritual power of the gospel which persuaded Sergius Paulus.

13:16-41 give a summary of Paul's message to the Jews. While Jesus is truly the expected King and Saviour in the line of David, he has confounded popular expectation since he has been rejected by the Jewish leaders, as the prophets predicted. Nevertheless, because of his resurrection he has become an everlasting king, offering forgiveness of sins through faith in his death on the cross, a salvation which achieves more than the Law of Moses.

14:14-17 give a summary of the message Paul and Barnabas preached to the Gentiles: faith in the one Creator God who has revealed himself in Jesus in place of polytheistic worship. This message is substantially repeated in Paul's speech in Athens in 17:22-31.

From Antioch the pattern was repeated: persuasive preaching backed up by demonstrations of power, leading to division between those who embraced the gospel and those who violently opposed it. Opposition and outright persecution were a feature of Christian experience from the beginning. Paul and Barnabas stayed in each town as long as possible, leaving when forced out by persecution and shaking the dust from their feet in protest (13:51; see Matthew 10:14). To stay permanently was impossible nor did the apostles intend to do so. Instead, they appointed elders by the laying on of hands (14:23). Thus, although these elders owed their authority to the apostles, the churches were semi-independent from the start. Before long this led to problems, as Paul had to assert his authority against what he saw as false teaching (Galatians 1:6).

Day 147. Psalm 140; Acts 15:1-35; Galatians 1 – 2

Paul's Dispute with the Judaisers

Psalm 140

A prayer for protection against the wicked.

Acts 15:1-35; Galatians 1 - 2

When the gospel was first preached in Jerusalem, followers of Christ were in effect a sect of Judaism, worshipping in the Temple until the persecution which broke out after Stephen's death. In the understanding of many in the Jerusalem church, Jesus fulfilled the promises made specifically to the Jewish people. For them, Gentiles could only share in this inheritance by first becoming Jews, which meant submitting to the Law and in particular accepting circumcision. But in Antioch, the church of which Barnabas and Paul were leaders included both Jews and Gentiles and there, if not before, Paul and perhaps his fellow leaders worked out a theology in which both Jews and Gentiles were saved in the same way and had the same access to God through Jesus Christ.

The fact that Paul welcomed Gentiles into the Church without requiring them to submit to the Law caused a dispute between Jerusalem and the Gentile churches which continued throughout Paul's ministry. The letter to Romans is almost entirely taken up with it. Although Paul's theology was clear and uncompromising, in practice he did his best to maintain the unity between believers who held the two positions, urging acceptance of the decrees of the Council of Jerusalem on those who were sceptical of the necessity for them (1 Corinthians 8 - 10; Romans 14), reminding Gentiles of the Jewish roots of their faith (Romans 9 - 11) and taking a leading part in a collection from the Gentile churches for the poor in Jerusalem (2 Corinthians 8 - 9).

The letter to the Galatian churches deals with the same issue as the Council at Jerusalem of Acts 15, but the relation between the two is uncertain. Is Galatians 2:1-10 Paul's personal view of the Council (in which case he set little store by its decrees, since he specifically omits to mention them in 2:10)? Or is it an account of a meeting with the apostles at the time of the visit in Acts 11? If the latter, then Galatians would have been written before

the Council and Peter's visit to Antioch of Galatians 2:11-13 coincides with Acts 15:1-2 as one of the events which sparked off the controversy.

In the letter, Paul insists on his independence from the Jerusalem church. He is not just another delegate from there, on a level with those who had introduced the Judaizing teaching, nor is he bound to their interpretation of the gospel. His teaching was received by revelation (1:12) and only subsequently checked with the apostles (2:2,9). In 2:15-end he moves from his answer to Peter to the doctrine of justification by faith which he develops at greater length in Romans 1 - 8. Because of the Law, we all deserve death. The only way to escape the condemnation of the Law is to die. But this is what we have done, through the death of Christ on the cross. We are set free from the demands of the Law and given new life through the resurrection of Christ. Whereas no one could achieve righteousness by keeping the Law, God now offers the power to live a righteous life as a free gift to be received by faith by both Jews and Gentiles.

Day 148. Psalm 141; Galatians 3 - 6

The Spirit, not the Law

Psalm 141

The writer prays for God's help to avoid falling into wrongdoing.

Galatians 3 - 6

The "Judaizers" insisted that Gentile converts could not become fully members of the Church without submitting to the Jewish Law. In particular, this would have meant that the men would have had to be circumcised, taking the sign of the covenant between God and his people. Paul vehemently opposed this, not simply on pastoral grounds (this would be too much to expect from Gentile converts) but on theological grounds. He argued firstly that Christ's death on the cross saves us *from* the Law. The Law has a power of its own which leads people into legalism, which he sees as bondage to "elemental" spirits, the spiritual forces behind both Greek and Jewish culture (4:3,8). Secondly, he argued that our rule of conduct is to be the new life God gives us through his Holy Spirit, not the old way of the Law.

In chapters 3 and 4, Paul sets out a series of arguments to show that faith in Christ both fulfils and supersedes the Law. A feature of Paul's style is that the arguments are given very briefly. He misses out the steps he would expect the readers to make for themselves. We may also feel that in places he takes liberties with the plain sense of Scripture, but this was a feature of rabbinical argument and would have been quite acceptable to his opponents.

- In 3:1-5 he argues from the Galatians' own experience. They have seen the signs of God's kingdom in the gift of the Spirit and works of power and know that these came when they put their faith in Christ, not when they decided to obey the Law.
- Then he turns to the Law itself. Abraham was justified because he believed, not because he kept the Law (3:6-9).
- The Law puts us under a curse, because we cannot keep it, but Christ redeems us from that curse (3:10-14).

- God's promises to Abraham were made some 450 years before the Law was given and were to be fulfilled not through Israel but through Christ (3:15-18).
- What then is the place of the Law (3:19)? Paul says it is like a tutor, someone put in charge of a child as he grows up with authority to punish him if he does wrong (3:24). The Law teaches us that we are sinners and cannot ever hope to satisfy God by our own efforts. It shows us that we need the justification which Christ gives.
- If the Law is a tutor, then we are little better than slaves, until we come into our inheritance and are set free from the Law's tutelage. Through the coming of Christ, we are set free from slavery, adopted as children and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (4:4-7). The conditions for acceptance by God are thus *the same* for both Jew and Gentile (3:27-29). The Holy Spirit makes the privilege of forgiveness and adoption real in our experience (4:6).
- If the Law is not to be the Christian's rule of conduct then what is? In a final argument, Paul uses Sarah and Hagar and their children as an allegory, the one born through human effort, the other the result of promise; and it is the child of promise who comes into the inheritance (4:21-end).

We are not slaves, but free (5:1), but there is a difference between liberty and licence (5:13). In fact, there is still a law, the law of love, the one written on our hearts by the Holy Spirit. What the Spirit does is to give us a new nature, so that instead of doing by nature the things which the Law opposes, we produce the kind of qualities which automatically fulfil the Law (5:19-23).

The Law, which is given to oppose the sinful nature, does not oppose the Spirit (5:23), so although the two are in harmony it is the indwelling Spirit who is our rule of conduct, rather than the Law. In fact, Paul hints, the presence of sin among the Galatian churches shows that their desire to be under the Law is not working; they had better put themselves under the Spirit (5:15,25-26; 6:7-10).

Day 149. Psalm 142; Acts 15:36 - 18:4

The Gospel in Europe

Psalm 142

A prayer for rescue from the prison of persecution.

Acts 15:36 - 18:4

The second missionary journey from Antioch began quite differently from the first. This time instead of the Holy Spirit's direct leading (13:2), the initial idea sprang from Paul's desire to revisit the churches (15:36). Instead of the unity of purpose with which the first journey began (13:3) the second began with a row between the two principal leaders, Paul and Barnabas (15:37-39). Despite the argument, Barnabas played his part by visiting his home island of Cyprus while Paul went to the churches in Galatia.

In the wake of the Council of Jerusalem, Paul was anxious to preserve unity. He would not have considered either Timothy's circumcision or the decrees of the Council as necessary for faith. The reason for them in his eyes was to prevent a damaging split between the Jewish and Gentile churches (see 1 Corinthians 9:16-23; in 1 Corinthians 8 - 10 Paul does his best to commend abstention from meat sacrificed to idols without conceding that it is a necessary part of faith).

After the controversy which gave rise to Galatians, Luke portrays the churches of Galatia as once more at peace and in fellowship with Paul (16:4-5). From Galatia, Paul and Silas were breaking new ground and again the Holy Spirit supplied direct guidance (16:6-10). Although they were prevented from going north into the province of Asia and had to cross instead to the continent of Europe, in Philippi the first person to respond to the gospel was a trader from Thyatira in Asia (16:14). Perhaps Lydia, like Priscilla and Aquila (18:2-3,18-19), played a part in preparing the ground for Paul's later visit to Asia.

16:10 begins one of the "we passages" of Acts, which implies that Luke was present. He joined the apostles at Troas, crossed with them to Philippi and appears to have stayed with the Philippian church after Paul left. In Gentile country the gospel began to spread, at least partly, through the conversion of whole households (16:15,31-34; 1 Corinthians 1:16; see also John 4:53

where a Gentile household is converted; John includes this detail as a reference to the later Gentile mission).

As in Cyprus (13:6-12), the arrival of Christian faith precipitated a clash with officially tolerated occult activity. In Palestine during the time of Jesus the spirits were seen to be evil but in pagan territory, as in Britain today, occult activity was tolerated and confronting it led Paul and Silas into difficulty. Philippi was a Roman colony and the leading city of the area (16:12); it was important for their further progress that Paul and Silas publicly refuted the racist attack that they had suffered (16:20-21) and establish their credentials as Roman citizens (16:35-37).

Paul's mission was to both Jews and Gentiles (18:4). His usual method was to go to the synagogue first (17:1-2; 18:4). Usually, the Jews were sympathetic, but their stumbling-block was Paul's willingness to welcome Gentiles on the same terms as themselves (17:4-5). The scare tactics of the Thessalonian Jews, based on condemning Jesus as a rival king to the emperor, suggest an official line of some sort (17:7; Luke 23:1-2).

In Athens, as in Iconium (14:15-17), Paul preached to a Gentile audience (17:22-31), emphasising the essentially Jewish message of one loving God over against the idols of Greek and Roman polytheism. His message, echoing Hosea and other Old Testament prophets, was that this God is a gracious provider who needs nothing himself and is to be worshipped purely out of gratitude rather than a desire to appease. To this he added the urgency of decision characteristic of the preaching of Jesus himself.

Day 150. Psalm 23; 1 Thessalonians

The Young Church

Psalm 23

The Lord, the secure protector.

1 Thessalonians

We know from Acts 17:5-9 that the church in Thessalonica experienced persecution from local people almost as soon as it began and that Paul had to leave very soon after its foundation because of the hostility of the Jews there. This letter was written soon after Paul's first visit. He writes to encourage the young church to continue faithful in the face of persecution. He tells them he is praying for them (1:2), recalls the joy of their early days (1:3-6), and tells them how their faith became an example to other churches (1:7-end). In 1:3, faith, hope and love are mentioned together, a connection characteristic of Paul (Romans 5:1-5; 1 Corinthians 13:13; Colossians 1:4-5).

One of the problems of Paul's continual journeying was that having introduced people to Christ, founded churches and developed a pastoral relationship with him, they did not want him to go. This relationship would be all the more powerful and important to them because the church was drawn together by a new quality of love for one another. They became like close family, calling each other "brother" and "sister" (1:4; 2:1,17; 3:12; 4:1,9-10,13; 5:1,12,26). His lengthy absence left Paul open to the charge that he did not really care for them. Much of this letter is written to rebut this and other charges which were evidently being made by his enemies in Thessalonica. He wants the church to know that he is praying for them (1:2), he reminds them of the character he and his fellow-workers displayed (1:5b-6a; 2:1-5) and the care they demonstrated when they were with them (2:6-12) and he assures them of his desire to visit again, of which Timothy's visit is the evidence (2:17-3:11).

But above all, Paul's concern is for the integrity of their faith. He reminds them of the power of the gospel (1:5); it is not his message but God's, and they believe it not because of him but because of the power of the Holy Spirit evident in their lives (2:13). In suffering persecution, he assures the

Thessalonians that they are in fact following in the footsteps of their brother Christians in other parts of the world (2:14-16).

One problem which troubled the church was the fate of those who died before the Lord's return. The expectation that the "day of the Lord" would come soon was clearly part of the message which Paul preached on his visit (1:10). Did this mean that those who died before the event would miss out on the promise of participating in the new creation? Paul writes to assure the church that this is not the case, setting out in the process a doctrine of a general resurrection (4:13-end). The dead in Christ are "asleep" (4:15) until woken by the trumpet and the archangel's shout (4:16), and they will in fact be the first to rise. So how should Christians live if the Lord's return threatens to cut short their earthly pursuits at any moment? Here Paul clearly bases his teaching on that of Jesus, even echoing his words (5:2; Matthew 24:42-44). To be awake and ready, Christians should be living the kind of lives appropriate to Jesus' followers, and he gives some concrete instructions in 4:1-12 and 5:12-22.

Day 151. Psalm 28; 2 Thessalonians; Acts 18:5-end

The Coming of Christ

Psalm 28

A prayer for deliverance from judgement.

2 Thessalonians

This letter was probably written shortly after the first to deal with two problems already alluded to in 1 Thessalonians: anxiety about the end times and the problem of idleness (1 Thessalonians 5:1-2,14; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15). This time Paul makes no mention of a second visit, but his knowledge of the situation in the church implies that he was able to keep in touch with them. The church is still suffering persecution, and still hoping for the Day of the Lord to come soon.

Both here and in the first letter, Paul encourages the church by assuring them that they are God's chosen, so that despite their present persecution their eventual salvation is secure. Peter does the same in 1 Peter 1:3-7. The evidence of God's choice includes the way they received the gospel at the beginning (1 Thessalonians 1:4-5) and their present faithfulness in persecution (2 Thessalonians 1:5-10). Those who persecute them also vindicate God's choice by refusing to accept the good news and hardening their hearts at it. The doctrine of election implied here does not make human decision redundant: the Thessalonians must still remain faithful by their own decision aided by the power of the Holy Spirit.

When Christ appears, he will put right the wrongs suffered by his persecuted people (1:6-9). The word translated "coming" in 2:1 is the Greek "parousia" which literally means "appearance". In Judaism, it was used for the final ingathering of God's people, the expected return of the Jews of the Dispersion to Israel. That something like this is in Paul's mind seems clear from the rest of the verse, but the gathering is not to Israel but to Jesus himself.

Paul is aware of a battle being played out in the spiritual realm with consequences on earth. His dream in Corinth and the subsequent failure of the case against him (Acts 18:9-17) may have been happening about the time this letter was written, making him aware of a special divine

protection. The "mystery of lawlessness", the rebellion of spiritual powers against God, is always at work in the world, but never outside God's control. When it is eventually fully revealed, it will be to be finally defeated (2:7-8). The book of Revelation sets out the same scenario in vivid detail. The fate of those who persecute the church will be all the worse because they are aligning themselves with this spiritual rebellion and believing a falsehood (2:9-12).

Acts 18:5-end

Paul's return to Antioch (18:22-23) brings the second missionary journey to an end, but by now Paul is beginning to spend longer in each place (18:11,18) and less time in Antioch, as the needs of the churches dominate his concern. There is a strong suggestion that Paul was already planning a visit to Ephesus. Priscilla and Aquila made their base their after moving from Corinth and may have helped to nurture the group of believers who encouraged Apollos. Achaia (18:27) was the region of Corinth, and we know from 1 Corinthians that Apollos had a major impact there.

Day 152. Psalm 133; 1 Corinthians 1 - 4

Foolishness and Factions

Psalm 133

A celebration of unity.

1 Corinthians 1 - 4

Before he takes the church at Corinth to task for a whole catalogue of errors, Paul begins with some words of encouragement. But even here, the things for which he commends the church are not those for which they are responsible, but rather the grace of Jesus, spiritual gifts and the power of God to keep them to the end (1:4-9). The introductory greeting ends with a reminder that they have been called into the "fellowship of Jesus Christ". "Fellowship" translates the Greek word *koinonia*, a friendship group or partnership. The rest of the letter will address the numerous ways in which the Corinthian Christians are ignoring that call and sinning against that fellowship.

However, the main purpose of his letter was to address the numerous problems in the church at Corinth. First of these was disunity. Acts 18:27-28 tells us that Apollos had visited Corinth soon after Paul left. He was a gifted speaker in the Greek tradition of rhetoric, and he seems to have taken the church in Corinth by storm. "Cephas" in 1:12 is the Greek version of Peter. Peter had probably not visited Corinth in person, but evidently some members of the Jerusalem church had done, claiming his authority.

The main comparison, however, is between Paul and Apollos. While Paul pointedly downgrades the importance of wisdom and eloquent speech (1:17; 2:1-5; 3:10-15,18-20), he does not blame Apollos for what has happened but places the blame squarely on the shoulders of the church and their immature attitudes. The signs of the Corinthians' immaturity are that they presume to judge the merits of the various apostles who have come to them; they are impressed by style rather than content (2:1-5); they fail to see any distinction between what is worldly and what is spiritual (2:6-end); and above all they divide into factions which quarrel among themselves (3:3-4). It is not Apollos who is to blame, then, but the church. Apollos has to stand and fall by the value of his own work, and although Paul hints that

it may not be as impressive as it seems (3:10-15), he refrains from judging it himself, leaving that to God alone (4:1-5).

From the start of the letter, however, Paul shows the ambivalence which comes out even more clearly in 2 Corinthians. Although he insists that the human messenger is nothing (3:5-9), he is at pains to defend himself and his ministry. If the Corinthian church, which God had brought into being through his preaching, was to take an attitude of superiority towards him, they would become unteachable and cut themselves off from the grace of God. So he points out that when he was with them he could not give them much in the way of spiritual wisdom because they were babes in the faith (3:1-2). He pointedly downplays the value of wise speech and rhetoric, and extols the merits of his own gentle approach (1:18 - 2:5). He tells them that he has a wisdom which they don't because they are still immature (2:6 - 3:5). Finally, he asserts with heavy irony that true maturity does not consist in being satisfied, well-fed and able to choose between a multitude of preachers, but in suffering for the gospel as he and his colleagues have had to do (4:8-13).

Day 153. Psalm 109:1-21; 1 Corinthians 5 – 7

"You were bought at a price"

Psalm 109:1-21

The psalmist complains to God about his enemies, who attack him vehemently without cause. The passage in verses 6-19 is the most virulent and sustained of all the cursings in the psalms. However, it is possible to understand these words as the words of the enemies, as N.R.S.V. translates.

1 Corinthians 5 – 7

There are two important features of the background to this letter which modern Christians may find difficult to grasp. One is the importance of the "fellowship". The members of these early churches were expected to live in accountable community with one another, something which the innate individualism of our society makes it difficult for us to comprehend. Secondly, the transition from paganism to Christianity was not proving an easy one. The idolatry and loose sexual morality of their society made it difficult for the Corinthians to adapt to the demands of Christian faith, just as the consumerism and sexualisation of our society make it difficult for us.

1 Corinthians 5

A member of the church is persisting in flagrant sexual sin and Paul sees this as a situation in which the church needs to take action. It is not the sexual nature of the sin which merits special treatment - in the previous chapters Paul has been castigating the church for their pride and in 5:11 he adds greed, idolatry, slander, drunkenness and swindling - but the fact that it is flagrant and deliberate. The church is to hold a meeting at which the offending person is to be excluded from the fellowship. This is what he means by handing the person over to Satan (5:5). By being put out of the church he is being returned to the kingdom of darkness, but in order to bring him to repentance once again. The second reason for such a measure is concern for the purity of the church. "A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough" (5:6). In other words, unless flagrant sin is decisively dealt with, it will spread as others begin to think such things permissible. Failure to deal with one instance makes it impossible to deal with subsequent situations.

1 Corinthians 6:1-11

Again Paul reasserts the corporate nature of the church against the individualism of those willing to take other Christians to court. By doing so they not only bring the church into disrepute, they ignore Christ's own teaching about turning the other cheek (6:7; Matthew 5:39-42), and are failing to live in the new reality of God's kingdom in which they themselves will be called upon to judge the world.

1 Corinthians 6:12-end

The background to this section is a particular kind of teaching which held that anything to do with the body was sinful while the spirit was good. For those who followed this teaching, it meant nothing done with the body mattered at all. One could eat anything, have sex with anyone and indulge any appetite, since salvation was a thing purely of the spirit. The quotations in 6:12 and 13 may be from Paul himself in a previous letter or from the Corinthians in one of theirs to him. By taking them out of context it was possible to make this teaching seem compatible with Christianity. But Paul asserts that bodily behaviour is far from unimportant. The bodily resurrection of Jesus shows how important bodies are (6:14). They belong to Christ, bought at the price of his own body on the cross. Far from being unimportant, sexual behaviour is perhaps the most important, because it means sinning against our own bodies (6:19-20).

1 Corinthians 7

From his own experience, Paul was convinced that it was better to be unmarried. He believed that the world was soon to come to an end, and as it did the crisis of judgement would be unleashed (7:26,29,31). In such a time of crisis, as in a war, a person may be better off unencumbered with family ties. On the other hand, Corinthian society, like our own, was corrupt and licentious. It was hard for someone to remain celibate. So for those who found it hard, marriage was the better option (7:1-9,36-38), providing of course that husband and wife remain faithful to one another. Divorce is permitted only if an unbelieving partner wishes it (7:12-16) and remarriage after divorce is forbidden (7:10-11).

In order to draw conclusions from this chapter for today, we have to decide how much of it applies to the special circumstances of first century Corinth and how much is universally applicable.

Day 154. Psalm 109:22-end; 1 Corinthians 8:1 - 11:1

Liberty and Responsibility

Psalm 109:22-end

The psalmist asks God to turn the taunts of his enemies back on themselves. In Corinth, Paul faced unjust accusations behind his back, which turned the hearts of the church away from him. His response was both to rebuke the church for their disloyalty and immaturity and to plead for their understanding.

1 Corinthians 8:1 - 11:1

According to Luke, Paul had passed on the decisions of the Jerusalem Council to the churches in Galatia and commended them (Acts 16:4), but this letter makes it plain that at Corinth they had not been a major factor in his preaching. In seeking to persuade the Corinthians to abstain from meat and keep clear of idols, he makes no mention of the decrees. He allows the church their point about liberty of conscience, and concedes that eating meat is not wrong; even taking part in idol worship is not necessarily wrong but unwise. How far he was adapting his arguments to what the church was able to hear it is difficult to judge. But clearly he sees the main danger to the church as an unloving pride and self-confident complacency, just as in the earlier and later chapters of this letter. As in chapters 6 and 7 the quotations may be from a letter of the Corinthians or from Paul himself.

The main thrust of his argument is to argue the case for love rather than "knowledge", by which the Corinthians meant perfect liberty of conscience (8:1-3, 10:23-24). Eating certain foods may not matter one way or the other: what does matter is another Christian's conscience. This means that love establishes a definite rule which takes precedence over liberty of conscience: those who do not mind about an issue should give way to those who do (8:4-end). In support of this rule, Paul argues vigorously that he himself has been following it, to the benefit of the Corinthians. He has to labour the point that he is entitled to call on their financial support if necessary, since they might be unwilling to concede it (9:1-14). In fact, while in Corinth he worked as a tentmaker (Acts 18:1-3). Not only did he not make use of his liberty to ask for financial support, but he sacrificed his

liberty to live as he pleased for the sake of winning more people to Christ (9:19-23).

Why should the Corinthians follow his example, since they have perfect liberty to choose? Because not doing so would also mean avoiding a proper Christian discipline. This in turn might put their whole Christian life in danger (9:24-27). The example of Israel in the wilderness is particularly apt for the Corinthians; they themselves are in danger from idolatry, sexual immorality, grumbling and testing God. Those who judge themselves strong enough to indulge their liberty of conscience need to beware of falling into temptation just as the Israelites did (10:1-13). Finally, although Paul concedes that an idol has no reality and that they worship the only God (8:4-6), idol worship has both a social and a spiritual reality. Not only is it easy to be drawn in by friends, but the spiritual realities behind such worship are dangerous and are to be avoided. It is foolishness to think that involvement in such practices has no effect (10:14-22).

To sum up, liberty of conscience must be governed by the law of love. Like Paul, those who think themselves mature should be thinking not about their own good but the good of the many (10:23 - 11:1).

Day 155. Psalm 150; 1 Corinthians 11:2 - 12:end

Worship in the Body of Christ

Psalm 150

A call to everything on earth to praise God.

1 Corinthians 11:2 - 12:end

The subject of chapters 11 - 14 is the gathering for worship, but Paul assumes that the church has an ongoing corporate life as the household of God or fellowship of Jesus Christ to which the worship contributes and from which it draws. If, when Christians gather for worship, there is no sense of the Body, God is not glorified. Where the actions of some individuals conflict with the corporate life, God is angered and true worship ceases (11:20,22,27,29-30,34; 12:25-26).

In 11:2-16 the question is one of propriety as reflected in the wearing of head coverings. But characteristically, Paul bases his judgment on deep theological understanding. He sees a hierarchy of headship: God, Christ, man woman. The relationship of man and woman should reflect that of God and Christ, and that of Christ and mankind as a whole (a similar argument is pursued in Ephesians 5:21-end where the relationship is one of sacrificial love on the one hand, respect and submission on the other). The word translated "head" can mean any of three things: "ruler", "source" or "origin", and "determining part". It is not necessary that rule or dominion are uppermost in Paul's mind. In 11:8 it is the meaning "origin" which he explicitly pursues. The passage is a difficult one, but we can tentatively conclude that it implies an understanding of male and female in which they are not independent but complementary and necessary to one another, something which Christian faith emphasised over Corinthian society at the time (11:11). Paul is traditional in his understanding of the respective roles of men and women. For him, they have different roles, the male determining, the female completing. He believed this difference was reflected in a difference of authority, which should be symbolised by what men and women wear on their heads. Today, the majority of Christians would say that this requirement was specific to the culture of the time. Of those who do, some would nevertheless maintain that Paul's understanding of gender roles is not culture specific.

The Corinthians celebrated Holy Communion or "the Lord's Supper" as an "agape meal". All ate together but each family brought their own food. But this system meant that the differences between rich and poor became most apparent precisely at the time when no such difference should have been made. Paul is not giving them a form for a eucharistic celebration by the words in 11:23-26; he is reminding them that it is Christ's death they are celebrating. Failure to love one's brother Christian in such a context is the ultimate denial of the gospel.

Chapters 12 to 14 correct the Corinthians' emphasis on the more spectacular gifts of the Spirit. He first warns them not to take over the norms of idol-worship (12:1-3). Falling into a trance in pagan worship is not at all the same thing as using gifts of the Spirit. The characteristic of the Spirit is freedom; that of dumb idols slavery. They should exercise more discernment and recognise the manifestation of the Spirit in everyone who acknowledges the Lordship of Christ rather than being over-impressed by tongue speakers in particular.

Secondly he argues that all gifts are of equal value, because all are given by the same Spirit (12:4-11). The distinction between gifts, service and working (12:4-6) may point to actual differences in practice, or it may be a rhetorical device to draw attention to the Father and the Son, who stand behind the Spirit wherever he is manifest. Finally, he argues that all the gifts are necessary to the functioning of the Body, so none is to be despised. In chapters 13 and 14 he will outline the criteria for their right use.

Day 156. Psalm 134; 1 Corinthians 13 - 14

The Exercise of Spiritual Gifts

Psalm 134

A call to pilgrims at the Temple gathered for a special night-time service to praise God.

1 Corinthians 13 - 14

Like many immature churches, the Corinthians placed too much value on the more spectacular spiritual gifts, perhaps because they still thought in terms more appropriate to pagan worship (see notes on 12:1-3). But Paul did not go to the opposite extreme, either forbidding or denying the importance of spiritual gifts. On the contrary, he maintained that they have great value, including speaking in tongues (14:1,18,24-25,39). But they are to be exercised in the context of and for the upbuilding of the corporate life of the church. Over division (1:10, 3:10-17), immorality (5:6-7), disputes (6:3-8), matters of conscience (8:9-13, 10:31-33), worship (11:20-32) and spiritual gifts (12:12-end) Paul had appealed to the believers' responsibility to one another as members of the one Body. This principle was clearly in his mind as he laid down the way in which spiritual gifts were to be exercised. The criteria he gives are that they are to be used a) in a fitting and orderly way (14:33,40); b) subject to corporate discernment (14:29,32); c) for the purpose of mutual upbuilding (14:12,26); d) so that they witness to the Lordship of Christ (12:1-3; 14:20-25).

The ability to speak in tongues is not the greatest gift, since on its own without interpretation it does not build up the church (14:1-17,27-28). In fact, strange tongues were what God used to speak to the unbelieving inhabitants of Judah in Isaiah's time (14:21). By placing a great value on tongues, the Corinthians rank themselves with unbelievers. On the other hand, prophecy speaks to believers, since it is clear and understandable and builds up the church. Thus prophecy given and received in the church is evidence of maturity and a sign of the presence of God, even to outsiders; whereas the church that makes much of tongues and allows their unfettered expression is acting childishly, unresponsive to God and does nothing for outsiders except put them off (14:22-25).

14:34-35 are puzzling, because they contradict 11:5, where Paul recognises the possibility of a woman praying or prophesying in the assembly, albeit with head covered. Either these verses were added by a later writer with a desire to emphasise church order and taking his cue from 14:33; or Paul is here giving a specific instruction to correct another abuse to which his attention had been drawn.

Behind the requirement to recognise the corporate dimension of church life stands the call to love. The specific criteria Paul gives point us in the direction of love, but love goes beyond them. To act in love is to fulfil all rules, to act without it is to make rules useless. Just as love is more important than knowledge (8:1), love is more important than gifts (13:1-3,8-10). As a spring of action love is knowable and possible, and we can give criteria for recognising when it is present (13:4-7). But love also opens us to the heart of God, which is beyond knowledge (13:12; Ephesians 3:17-21).

Day 157. Psalm 36; 1 Corinthians 15 - 16

Resurrection

Psalm 36

The wicked seek their own advantage whereas in fact goodness is its own reward. God's love is the source of life and fulfilment.

1 Corinthians 15

This chapter was evidently written to refute some who taught that there was no resurrection (15:12) and to establish that belief in bodily resurrection is central to Christian faith. Paul argues from the tradition of the resurrection appearances of Christ, which he both received and handed on (15:3). Jesus' resurrection is part of the foundation of Christian faith. It is not to be called into question simply because it raises questions which cannot be answered in terms of purely human philosophy. The resurrection is a decisively new thing, and not only do the categories of our thinking need to expand to make room for it, but belief in resurrection transforms every other part of our understanding of the world.

First, Paul shows that belief in the resurrection lies at the heart of Christian faith. Without the resurrection, Christian faith would make no significant difference to our life on earth. Our sins would not be forgiven (15:17), since it is the resurrection which proclaims Jesus' victory over sin and death. The purpose of Jesus' death and resurrection was to reverse the effect of Adam's original sin. Paul treats Adam as an historical figure whose disobedience condemned all his descendants to live under the power of sin and death. Alternatively, we can understand Adam as a representative figure, whose story portrays the situation of everyone.

But in fact, death, "the last enemy", is a fundamental contradiction of God's will. Jesus came to bring life, a life so powerful as to overcome death (John 1:4; 5:24-26; 6:40; 10:10 etc.). Apparently, some in Corinth had gone through a ceremony of baptism "on behalf of the dead" (15:29), and Paul evidently does not disapprove of such a thing, though he himself seems to make little of baptism (see 1:14-17). Most probably these were Christians who had died without being baptised, perhaps because of an epidemic. Both this practice and Paul's sacrificial lifestyle argue the hope of a life to come (15:30-32).

Having established the reasons for belief in the resurrection, Paul turns to the supplementary question, which may have been the cause of the Corinthians' scepticism: how are we to conceive of such a resurrection? Here he is explicit that the form of the resurrection breaks the categories of human thought. For Greek philosophy a "spiritual body" was a contradiction in terms (15:44). The change which is to take place is a "mystery", not to be understood in human categories (15:51). It is quite wrong to speak of a "physical resurrection", since the body Paul envisages is explicitly not a physical one. Instead we should speak of a "bodily resurrection," on the understanding that the body with which we are to be clothed in the resurrection is one of a different kind to that which we now have. The connection between the form of our life here and in the resurrection is analogous to that of a seed and the plant which grows from it. The plant may be entirely different but there is a continuity of identity. We will continue to be the same people, but in a body of a different kind, a body like that of Jesus in his resurrection (15:49).

Characteristically, Paul's conclusion is a practical one (15:58). A glorious new life awaits us, so we ought to persevere despite the hardships of this one.

1 Corinthians 16

Here for the first time we hear about the collection for the church at Jerusalem which Paul was organising, a visible sign of unity between Christians divided by doctrine and background, important enough to Paul to insist on it in the Gentile churches and to risk his life to take the money to Jerusalem.

The journeys of Apollos (16:12) and of Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus (16:17) illustrate the way in which Paul was able to keep in close touch with the churches he had founded around the Roman world. No doubt these men gave him the information on which the rebukes in this letter are based, and they had the unenviable task of carrying the letter back to Corinth with them. Aquila and Priscilla (16:19) had come from Corinth to Ephesus with Paul (Acts 18:18-19).

**Day 158. Psalm 43; Acts 19:1 - 20:12;
2 Corinthians 1:1 - 2:13**

Paul in Ephesus

Psalm 43

A prayer for deliverance from enemies and a statement of trust in God.

Acts 19:1 - 20:12

The stay in Ephesus was a significant time in Paul's life, during which the gospel spread throughout the province of Asia (19:10), he wrote some of his most important letters, and he experienced an enormous burden of persecution and spiritual pressure (2 Corinthians 1:8-9; 11:28-29).

Arriving in Ephesus, he took up his ministry where he had left off, by preaching in the synagogue (18:19; 19:8). Nevertheless in his absence things had moved on, in particular with the preaching of Apollos (18:24-26). The twelve men whom Paul encountered who knew only the baptism of John may have been converted as a result of Apollos' preaching.

Ephesus was a port and the main city of the province, but it had a considerable economic and cultural hinterland. By establishing himself in Ephesus and holding daily discussions (19:9), he could attract people from all over the province who would be passing through the city. With the help of fellow-workers, churches were started not only in Ephesus itself but in many of the inland towns. In the case of Colossae, we know that it was Epaphras, one of Paul's companions and fellow-workers, who was instrumental in preaching and setting up the local church (Colossians 1:8-9).

Paul was also in correspondence with the churches in Greece and trying to co-ordinate his work with that of his fellow workers and other apostles (19:22; 20:4-5; 1 Corinthians 16:5-12). 1 Corinthians was written from Ephesus (1 Corinthians 16:19) and Romans in preparation for his planned visit (19:21). 2 Corinthians was probably written during his stay in Macedonia mentioned in 20:1-2.

From the recurrence of "we" and "us" from 20:5, it appears that on his return to Philippi Paul met Luke once again and took him with him when he left.

2 Corinthians 1:1 - 2:13

The period in Ephesus was one of intense spiritual battle, no doubt because of the presence of the Temple of Diana, an important centre of pagan worship. Not only do we find other exorcists at work but vehement opposition (Acts 19:13-16,23-end). The extraordinary miracles which took place and the conversion of many leading occult practitioners demonstrate the power at work in Paul's ministry (Acts 19:11-12,17-22). Nevertheless, the scale of the opposition took its toll on Paul, emotionally and spiritually, as the opening verses of 2 Corinthians testify.

Despite his long letter to them, Paul's relationship with the church at Corinth had deteriorated. At the end of that letter he made a promise to visit them if he should travel through Macedonia and perhaps stay with them some time (1 Corinthians 16:5-9). This promise he failed to keep, leading the Corinthians to suspect him of vacillation and failure to care for them. Paul longed to justify himself in the face of these charges, not only to clear his name but because if they judged the messengers of the gospel as untrustworthy, they might come to regard the gospel as untrustworthy also. Recognising this dual motive, Paul tries to make it clear that he is justifying himself only for their own good. Yet he also wants them to understand more fully the calling of an apostle so as to make them more open to the further teaching he has for them (1:13-14).

After opening his heart, sharing with the church his and his colleagues' experience of suffering (1:1-11), Paul rebuts the charges made against him. He has not vacillated or been unreliable; on the contrary he serves a God who is always wholly reliable (1:15-22). He has not been lacking in his care for them; it was to spare them that he decided not to visit and now he longs for a renewal of their relationship (1:23 - 2:11). In fact, he even interrupted a fruitful period in Troas with the idea of coming to them (2:12-13).

Day 159. Psalm 42; 2 Corinthians 2:14 - 7:1

Suffering and Glory

Psalm 42

Depressed and in trouble, the writer puts his trust in God.

2 Corinthians 2:14 - 7:1

Paul's main aim was to bring the Corinthians to a fuller appreciation of the character of God and the apostolic ministry, and here the guiding rule is not worldly wisdom but grace (1:12) or mercy (4:1). His plans had gone awry but Christ was victorious. He and his colleagues are like prisoners in Christ's triumphal procession. They have no control over their fate, but as they are paraded before watching eyes they spread the knowledge of his victory (2:14-15). Their success in making converts and founding churches is not of their own making, since they are unequal to the task (2:16; 3:4-6). Their only recommendation is that they are faithful to the message (2:17; 4:2), and the Corinthians ought to know this because they are among those to have heard the message from them and received it (3:1-3).

His worry was that by misjudging the messengers the Corinthians would misjudge the message. But he also either knew or suspected that he had detractors at Corinth and he wrote to refute their allegations (5:12-13). These men judged by surface appearance and were encouraging the Corinthians to do the same. So Paul dwells on the contrast between the glory of the message and the fate of the messengers, which has its origin in the cross and resurrection of Jesus.

Using the story of the brightness of Moses' face as recorded in Exodus 34:29-end, Paul contrasts the glory of the new covenant, of which he is a minister, with that of the old. The old covenant is a law written on tablets of stone, the new a message written on human hearts (3:3). The old covenant came with a fading glory, just as the brightness of Moses' face faded away in time. The new covenant comes with a glory which lasts (3:7-11). When the old covenant was given, Moses hid his face, because the Israelites could not bear to look at him. Paul and his companions do not attempt to hide the message, but are bold in proclaiming it (3:12-13). Moses' veil also symbolises the failure of the Jews to understand the grace of God. Just as

they could not look on the brightness of Moses' face, so they cannot see the glory of the new covenant (3:14-15; 4:3-4). And just as Moses removed his veil when he went into the tent to speak to God, so the Christian, with the Holy Spirit dwelling in his heart, is always in the presence of God and receiving his glory. Through the power of the Spirit we become progressively more and more like Jesus (3:16-18).

It is this inner transformation rather than outward impressiveness which equips Paul and his colleagues as ministers of the gospel. As they travel, some are attracted to the message and others repelled (2:14-16; 4:3-4). But in all, Christ is glorified because he will be truly proclaimed.

So Paul appeals to the Corinthians to stop judging by appearances. Even Christ, who knew no sin, became sin for us when he died on the cross (5:21) and they themselves are a new creation in Christ, in which the old is replaced by the new (5:17). Just as the apostles share the inner glory of the resurrection, they also share the outward vulnerability of the crucifixion. Their trials, which Paul describes in 4:7-9 and 6:4-10, are not signs of failure but a reflection of the crucifixion and resurrection. They are also preparing them for an eternal glory to come (4:16 - 5:10).

In rejecting Paul, the Corinthians are in danger of rejecting the gospel itself (6:1-2). Those who so misjudge Paul and his ministry are in effect unbelievers, for all their profession of faith. As with the Galatians, where he believed that the preachers of a "different gospel" could not possibly be genuine Christians, those who set themselves up as teachers and yet fail to understand the true calling of an apostle demonstrate their lack of credentials, and the Corinthians should reject them (6:14 - 7:1).

Day 160. Psalm 41; 2 Corinthians 7:2 - 9:end

Generous Giving

Psalm 41

A sick man imagines his enemies and even his one-time friends rejoicing at his misfortune. He blesses those who really care and show their love in his time of need.

2 Corinthians 7:2-end

Paul continues his appeal to Corinth for reconciliation (5:20; 6:1; 7:2). Accordingly, the tone of this part of the letter is of encouragement. Titus had returned with news of the way the church had responded to Paul's earlier letter, and although too well aware of how many problems remained, Paul applauds them for the actions they have taken (7:11). Repentance was necessary, but once made, no barrier to the grace of God remained.

2 Corinthians 8 - 9

The grace of God is the underlying theme of the letter. Paul's ministry and that of his fellow-workers is founded in God's grace (1:12). His desire was that the Corinthians open themselves to the same grace (6:1) and the concrete demonstration of this grace at work in their lives was to be seen in their willingness to contribute towards the gift Paul was collecting for the Jerusalem church (see 1 Corinthians 16:1-4).

Despite his many disagreements with Jerusalem, Paul recognised the unity of the church as paramount, Moreover, he believed the Gentile churches should express their spiritual debt to their Jewish brothers and sisters by helping them in a material way.

Philippi was the principal church of Macedonia, and this church, to which Paul was particularly close, played a major part in supporting him from the earliest days (Philippians 4:15-16). When approached for money for Jerusalem they responded with generosity once again, and in Paul's mind their generosity is evidence of the generosity of God himself at work in them (8:1-5). The example of Christ himself is of generosity, accepting poverty in order to make many rich (8:9), and those who give generously

demonstrate this aspect of his character. So Paul places the emphasis on willing giving; our alms are acceptable to God as long as they are freely given from thankful hearts (8:12). It is the cheerful giver whom God loves (9:7).

Although emphasising that he is not requiring any gift (8:8), Paul makes it clear that he expects one. He has boasted to others about the willingness of Corinth to contribute and does not wish to be embarrassed (9:1-5). He has appointed men who are trusted by more than one church to oversee the collection (8:18-end). These men are not named, but Titus, the bearer of the letter would be expected to introduce them personally. And the Corinthians, who are so rich (8:7), should expect to give, to relieve the poverty of others (8:13-15).

In 8:15, Paul quotes Exodus 16:18, taken from the story of the manna in the wilderness, and the dependence of Israel on God's daily provision is clearly in his mind as he writes these instructions. God is a generous giver (9:9), but his generosity is only experienced by those who know how to give themselves. Those who give generously to others receive generously from God (9:8-12).

Day 161. Psalm 39; 2 Corinthians 10 - 13

Paul and the "Super-Apostles"

Psalm 39

Feeling remorse at having spoken hastily, the writer laments his failure to govern his words in the presence of the wicked and acknowledges his need for God's guidance and protection.

2 Corinthians 10 - 13

In some ways the situation in the Corinthian church presupposed by these chapters seems to be different from that to which chapters 1 - 9 are addressed. There, Paul rejoiced in the fact that the church had responded well to his previous letter and looks forward to their welcome (7:13-16); but in these chapters he is indignant at their rejection of his ministry (10:1-2,9-10). Then, the person responsible for unsettling the church had been repudiated (2:5-11); now a group of "super-apostles" is very much in charge (11:1-5; 12:11). Moreover, 12:18 refers to a visit of Titus and "another brother" as past, whereas in 8:16-19 it is still projected. All this implies that chapters 10 - 13 are part of a later letter, written after Titus' second visit, when the relationship between Paul and Corinth had taken a further turn for the worse. It took his three month stay in Greece (Acts 20:2-3) to put the situation to rights.

It appears that the "super-apostles" had arrived with letters of commendation (10:12), that their ministry was characterised by eloquent and impressive preaching and spectacular miracles (11:5-6; 12:11-12), that they used their outward impressiveness to demand loyalty from the Corinthians (11:12), expecting to be supported financially and even imposing on members of the church (11:20). In contrast, they criticised Paul for his "weakness" (10:10) and argued that his refusal to ask for financial support implied that there was something wrong with his ministry (11:7-9).

How was Paul to respond to these charges and regain the respect of those who had been thoroughly taken in by the spectacular display and arrogant boasting of the "super-apostles"? On the one hand he deplored the immaturity which had led them astray. On the other, he knew he must acquiesce in it to some degree. He must write to the Corinthians in terms

that they understood. Accordingly, he boasts of his own background (11:22), his signs and miracles (12:12), the success of his ministry (10:12-end), the persecution he has endured (11:23-end), the visions he has seen (12:1-5) and the power he experiences (10:3-6). But in doing so, he insists that these things are merely the surface (10:7). Real apostleship does not consist in such things. It consists in being conformed to the image of Christ himself, who was outwardly meek and gentle (10:1). It consists in enduring weakness for his sake (11:30-32) and in willingly accepting one's total dependence on him (12:7-10).

Of this, the "super-apostles" know nothing, and that makes them false apostles, fit only to lead their hearers astray (11:13-15), peddlars of a different gospel, believers in a different Jesus (11:4). The Christ in whom we believe was one who was crucified in weakness as well as being raised in power (13:4). This obliges those who would serve him not only to preach the cross but also to embrace the cross in their own lives (1 Corinthians 2:1-5). Real power and real wisdom is to be judged not by human criteria but in the light of the gospel (1 Corinthians 1:18-end).

Concentration on personality and power is a danger for the church in any age, especially when a movement of spiritual renewal leads to large numbers of immature Christians. Paul's letters to Corinth should enable us to recognise these tendencies as signs of immaturity and avoid them.

Day 162. Psalm 143; Romans 1 - 2

The Universal Reign of Sin

Psalm 143

The writer prays for God's mercy, to escape from his enemies.

Romans 1 - 2

In the opening verses of the letter Paul carefully establishes his relationship with the Roman church. Unlike the churches to which he addresses his other letters, Paul had not founded the church. In that cosmopolitan city, it had probably grown up piecemeal. Acts 2:10 mentions Romans converted on the Day of Pentecost. Others may have been brought to Christ by their witness or moved into the city from elsewhere. So Paul carefully establishes the outline of the gospel, using a traditional formula: Jesus is Son of David and Son of God, crucified and risen. Having mentioned his commission to preach the gospel, he explains how the Roman church is among those for which he has responsibility. Not only that but he has heard of their witness and rejoices at it, he is praying for them and hopes to visit them for mutual encouragement. The arguments of Galatians and 1 and 2 Corinthians suggest that many Roman Christians would have been suspicious of Paul, especially Jews, who would have thought he was subverting the Law. Possibly too, there was a division between Jewish and Gentile Christians. This letter, written to prepare the ground for Paul's visit, addresses the issues of the place of the Law in God's plan, the situation of the Jews in the light of the revelation through Jesus, and how Christians of different backgrounds are to live together.

In 1:17 Paul announces the theme of the letter and backs it up by a quotation from Scripture: the righteousness of God which comes by faith. The first and most obvious aspect of God's righteousness is his wrath against sin. 1:19-21 contains a very important doctrine: it is open to all to recognise that God exists and created the world. Those who fail to do so are not simply ignorant; they are deliberately avoiding or suppressing an obvious truth (1:18). As a result they are "without excuse", and God's judgement on them is perfectly just. Here and again in 2:12-16 Paul implies that there is a natural and inborn knowledge of right and wrong which everyone possesses (not that all will agree on exactly what is right and

wrong), and that sin consists in ignoring it. To ignore the prompting of conscience and the universally available revelation of creation naturally leads people into futility. In the Gentile world of his day, idolatry was wide-spread, and in many places closely associated with homosexual practices. As a Jew, Paul would have had the kind of view of idol-worship expressed in Isaiah 44:9-20 and an instinctive distaste for homosexuality as unnatural. These two are bracketed together in 1:22-27. Then follows a list of the sins to which God has abandoned those who reject him. Notice Paul rates *approving* of such things worse than doing them (1:32). He challenges us to consider whether in fact to condone adultery is worse than stumbling into an extra-marital affair, to advocate abortion worse than to choose one under pressure.

Since all are caught up in the web of sin, the proper response to the sin of others is not judgement but a repentant spirit (2:1-4). In chapter 2, Paul appears to allow the possibility that before God, who judges all according to their deeds, some may escape condemnation (2:7,14-16). But these verses must be understood in the light of the larger argument he is developing, namely that both Jews and Gentiles are in the same situation. Jews possess the Law while Gentiles have only their consciences to guide them. But it is not possession of the Law which confers righteousness, but obedience to it (2:13,17-end). God judges all people by the same standard: have they been faithful to the light they have? The Jews, having received the Law, will be judged by a higher standard. So far, the question of whether any will actually escape is left open, to be answered in chapter 3.

Day 163. Psalm 38; Romans 3 - 4

Justification by Faith

Psalm 38

The writer prays to be delivered from the wrath of God.

Romans 3 - 4

In chapters 1 and 2, Paul has argued that Jews and Gentiles are in the same position before God as regards sin: all alike fall under his condemnation. Now he argues that Jews and Gentiles are in the same position as regards salvation. It is offered to both on the same terms: through faith in the death and resurrection of Christ. If this is the case, what was the point of God choosing the Jews at all? This is a point he will take up at much greater length in chapters 9 to 11. Here he gives a brief answer: the Jews were the ones through whom the Law was given, which reveals the righteousness of God in contrast to human sin (3:2,5,9,19-20).

The quotations in 3:10-18 do not establish the point that all people are sinful. In fact, they are taken from passages which condemn the sinful and foolish *in contrast to* the righteous. The argument is contained in the second half of chapter 2, where Paul has shown that the true Jew is one whose circumcision is inward and spiritual, who keeps the Law from his heart. Since no one, in fact, achieves this, the quotations simply witness to the universality of human sin. The function of the Law is to bring us to the place where we realise the extent of our sinfulness and our need of the salvation which God offers (3:19-20).

Having established the universal need of salvation, Paul sets out in a few highly compressed verses how this salvation is achieved. God offers his own righteousness as a free gift to all who put their faith in the death of Jesus on the cross. The Greek word translated "sacrifice of atonement" in N.I.V. and N.R.S.V. literally means a "mercy seat" or place of atonement. In Jewish ritual, the whole people was cleansed by the blood sprinkled year by year on the mercy seat in the Holy of Holies, the innermost place of the Temple (Leviticus 16:15-16). Now, Paul says, it is the blood of Jesus which cleanses us. Because Christ has died to make atonement, God justifies the

guilty even while we are still sinful. Through his sacrifice God both vindicates his righteousness and makes it available to us.

Having shown that justification by faith is the free gift offered to both Jews and Gentiles, Paul now sets out to prove that Abraham was also justified in this way. If he can show this to be true for Abraham, then it follows that the same is true for the whole Jewish nation. Genesis 15 is the first of two accounts of God's covenant with Abraham. The other is Genesis 17 where the sign of circumcision is given. In Genesis 15:6 we are told that "Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness." In other words, Abraham received God's righteousness on the basis of his trust in God. And when he later received circumcision, this was simply a seal of the righteousness which he had already been given beforehand. Since Abraham received the righteousness of God by faith before he was circumcised, he is the forerunner of all those who similarly believe without being circumcised, as well as those who, being circumcised, put their faith in God's mercy rather than in their own ability to keep the Law (4:11-14).

Furthermore, Abraham's faith was a forerunner of Christian faith. He had to believe in the power of God to give life in the face of lifelessness - his own old age and Sarah's barrenness. He is therefore the spiritual father of those whose trust in God is based on the resurrection of Jesus from the dead (4:17-end).

Day 164. Psalm 130; Romans 5 - 7

Living under Grace

Psalm 130

One of the "penitential psalms", in which the writer recognises his sinful nature and places his hope in God's mercy and grace.

Romans 5 - 7

Having made the case for justification by faith for both Jews and Gentiles, Paul opens a new section in which he will spell out the practical effects for Christian living. In chapters 5 to 7 his theme is "this grace in which we now stand," (5:2). Christians are delivered from an old life, dominated by sin, death and law into a new life characterised by assurance, hope and the power of the Holy Spirit. Even suffering works to our good by increasing our hope and assurance and our reliance on the Holy Spirit (5:3-5; see further 8:18-25).

Faith in Jesus' death on the cross delivers us from an old life dominated by sin into a new one in which we "reign" by the power of Jesus' victorious life (5:10,17). To argue this in detail, Paul takes up the comparison between Christ and Adam which he used previously in 1 Corinthians 15. Again, Paul takes Adam as an historical man whose sin condemned all his descendants to live under the power of sin and death, even those whose sin did not take the form of deliberate rebellion against God's command (5:12-14). The comparison also works if we take Adam as representative of us all. When he was created Adam was given "dominion" over creation (Genesis 1:28). At the Fall, Adam himself fell under the dominion of sin, but for those who put their faith in him Jesus now restores the power to "rule". Born into a sinful world, we all inherit the tendency to sin which alienates us from God, but through the death of Jesus, we are offered the free gift of God's righteousness and with it the power to live righteous lives (5:21).

Chapter 6 develops this argument further by taking up an objection. If our justification is a gift of grace, to which our own good deeds add nothing, why not simply carry on sinning? (6:1). Our baptism tells us that this cannot be so. In baptism we identify with the death and resurrection of Christ, taking them for our own so that we may receive the benefits of

them. Death and resurrection are irreversible. Having once died and been restored to life we cannot go back to the old life. In the new life, we need no longer be mastered by sin, but have the power to overcome it (6:12-14; see further 8:1-4). To sin voluntarily would be to return to the futile ways from which Jesus has delivered us (6:20-21). Why should we do so when a new and more powerful way of life based on the righteousness of God is available?

Here, and in chapter 7, Paul is dealing with real issues which arise in the life of the Christian. We are called to a new way of life, but it is easy, through pressure of temptation and force of habit to relapse into the old and futile ways of thinking. In chapter 12, he will urge us to be "transformed by the renewal of our minds" (12:2). In chapter 6, he shows us why the Christian should fight temptation and sin; in chapter 7 he looks at the place of the Law in Christian life. His main point is that we are freed from the Law in order to serve God in the new way of the Spirit (7:6). The function of the Law is to make us aware of sin, but by doing so it weighs us down with guilt and leads to death (7:7-11). Such guilt often turns Christians to a life of legalism in an attempt to escape the condemnation of the Law, not for us the Jewish Law but some other set of moral standards we make for ourselves. But Paul will have none of this. The Law has no more claim on us (7:1-6); and what delivers us from slavery to the Law is the power of the Holy Spirit (8:1-2).

Day 165. Psalm 27; Romans 8

Life in the Spirit

Psalm 27

Confidence in the Lord in the face of troubles.

Romans 8

We have seen God's righteousness displayed in his judgement on sin (1:18-end); in the giving of the Law (3:19-20; 7:12-13); in the death of Jesus on the cross (3:21-26); and in the free gift of eternal life (5:20-21). In chapter 8, Paul explains how the righteousness of God is displayed through the gift of the Spirit (8:4,10). It sums up both the section of the letter which began in chapter 5 and also the whole letter so far, by showing how God's desire that his chosen people live righteous, sin-free lives is fulfilled through the sending of the Holy Spirit and in particular how the gift of eternal life available to us because of the death of Jesus on the cross is made real by the indwelling Holy Spirit.

Chapter 7 ended with an exposition of the terrible bind we are apt to get into if we try to live the Christian life by our own efforts. We can see the righteousness of God's laws and try to live according to them, but the "law of sin and death" present in our "body" or "sinful nature" always lets us down by leading us into sin. However, with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, God has put into operation a new law, the "law of the Spirit of life". This "law", which is none other than the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives, enables us to overcome the weakness of the sinful nature, resist temptation and live lives of righteousness, thus fulfilling the requirements of the righteous law (8:4). Thus it is through the power of the Spirit at work in our lives that we are enabled to fight sin in our nature, as Paul has already urged us to do (6:12-14; 8:5-8) as the only way to live out our baptism (6:3-11).

If we concentrate merely on trying to keep the Law we will fail, but by living in the power of the Holy Spirit we are enabled to fulfil the requirements of the Law. Paul has insisted all along that to try to achieve a righteousness of our own by fulfilling the Law is slavery - not slavery to the Law but to the sinful nature which always frustrates us (6:15-end; 7:23-25).

Now, taking up the image of adoption he had used in an earlier letter (Galatians 3:23 - 4:11), he shows that the Spirit sets us free from slavery to become children of God. We serve God not by trying to obey the Law in all its detail but "in the new life of the Spirit" (7:6). Obligation to the Law is replaced by a new obligation, to live according to the Spirit (8:12). The new way of the Spirit consists in "putting to death the misdeeds of the body", that is, relying on the power of the indwelling Spirit to resist temptation and to live righteous lives. As we do this, we are released from slavery both to the Law and to sin. We receive the life and peace promised to those who live with a clear conscience (8:6; see 2:10), we are saved by the life of Christ, lived in us by the Holy Spirit (8:12-13; see 5:10) and, as God's children, reign with him in life (8:17; 5:17).

The idea of our reign with Christ is taken up in the theme of glory, first mentioned in 5:2. Already in 2 Corinthians 3:18, Paul has shown how we are being progressively changed to reflect the glory of God. In Colossians 1:27 he sums up the whole gospel as "Christ in you, the hope of glory." Our destiny as Christians is to share the glory of God, which Jesus now enjoys; but to achieve this we have to share the sufferings that Jesus endured (8:17). Yet because we have hope, everything that happens to us, including our sufferings, is in fact preparing us for eventual glory (5:3-5). The Spirit not only makes us aware of the wrongness of sin; he shows us the futility of the present world, helping us to share the true divine perspective on it (8:20-23); he continually witnesses in us to the hope that one day we, along with the whole creation, will be liberated to enjoy to the full the privilege of being God's children and heirs (8:23-25); it is he who enables us to pray according to God's will, and it is the prayers of God's people which bring the day of redemption nearer for the whole creation (8:26-27); thus all that happens to us, if we respond to it in the power of the Spirit, brings us closer to sharing in the divine glory (8:28-30).

Assuming that, like him, the Christians in Rome are undergoing their own share of suffering, Paul ends with a paean of praise to the God whose love never leaves us and who makes it possible for us to share this hope.

Day 166. Psalm 117; Romans 9 - 11

The Jews Under the New Covenant

Psalm 117

Israel calls all nations to praise the Lord for his enduring faithfulness.

Romans 9 - 11

The argument Paul has developed in the first eight chapters leaves a major set of questions unanswered. If the gospel places Jew and Gentile on the same footing, what becomes of God's special relationship with and promise to the Jews? Is the previous covenant and all that went with it nullified? How are both Jewish and Gentile Christians to understand the special heritage of the Jews?

Paul's answer is that the greater part of the Jewish people has been hardened in order that salvation through faith might be preached to the Gentiles (11:25). Salvation is "first for the Jew, then for the Gentile" (1:16; 2:10). Because many of the Jews have rejected the gospel, it has been preached to the Gentiles (Acts 13:46-48; 28:23-28). In the course of Israel's deliverance from Egypt, Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and because he resisted it became clear that their deliverance was an act of God alone (9:16-18). In the same way, the gospel is not being offered to the Gentiles by the Jews but by God despite the hostility of the Jews.

The fact that Pharaoh did not co-operate in the deliverance from Egypt and the Jews are not willingly offering the gospel to the nations demonstrates that salvation is a gift of God's mercy in a world hostile to him (9:16; 11:32). This gift of mercy is made to the elect, whom God has specially chosen. A strong doctrine of predestination runs throughout these chapters (9:10-18; 11:1-8,25-32). But equally, it is clear that predestination does not exclude human responsibility. The reason the Jews "stumbled" and were hardened (9:32) is that they were disobedient. Instead of seeing in the Law the righteousness of God, they used it to pursue a righteousness of their own, based on works. When Christ came, to whom the Law points, they rejected him, (10:3-4). 10:5-end argue at length from the Old Testament that the Jews have had ample opportunity to hear, understand, believe and call upon God but have failed to do so.

So too, if the Gentiles who now believe become unfaithful, they may be rejected again (11:22-24). God's covenant community remains essentially Jewish. In the course of the letter, Paul has argued that Christians are heirs to the covenant (4:9-11), the promises made to the patriarchs (4:16), the glory of God (5:2) and are adopted as his children (8:14-17). But all these things belong to the Jews by right (9:4-5). They are the stem of the tree into which the Gentiles have now been grafted (11:17-21). And God's purpose is that in time all the Jews now rejected will be restored again. We are to understand the promises of the Old Testament not simply as applying now to the Church, but also as remaining to be fulfilled to the Jewish nation because God's final purpose is the salvation of the Jews along with the Gentiles (11:11-12,25-31).

Day 167. Psalm 72; Romans 12:1 - 15:13

Living Together in Peace

Psalm 72

A vision of a King reigning in righteousness and bringing "shalom" to his people in the form of prosperity, justice and harmony. The kingdom of God is "righteousness, peace ("shalom") and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Romans 14:17).

Romans 12:1 - 15:13

With the words "therefore" and "in view of God's mercy" (12:1), Paul links his practical teaching with the doctrinal arguments which have gone before. He has argued that Christians are not under Law so he is not "commanding" but "urging", and outlining an alternative way of living. In place of the sacrifices of the Law are to be the "living sacrifices" made by God's people in everyday life. In place of the commandments is to be the knowledge of God's perfect will derived from a renewed mind (12:2). In the common life within the Church, the renewed mind will express itself in humility, and the sacrifice of the body in the willingness to offer one's gift wholeheartedly for the common good (12:3-8). The keynotes of Christian life will be love and humility (12:9-end).

The instructions Paul goes on to give are adapted especially for the situation in Rome, the heart of the empire, with its many household based churches spread throughout the city incorporating both Jewish and Gentile believers from a variety of cultural backgrounds, constantly in danger of exciting the hostility of their neighbours.

In 13:1-7, he expresses a strong doctrine of the role of the state. It is worth remembering that he was writing about a state hostile to Christian faith and sometimes actively engaged in persecution. And yet here Paul affirms the original good purpose of the powers and principalities God has placed in the world. In God's world, the secular authorities are there to protect the citizen, encourage co-operation and maintain relative peace and stability. Governments and their laws regulate wrong-doing and put a brake on hatred and violence, fulfilling the mandate given to all humanity under the covenant with Noah in Genesis 9:1-6.

In place of obligation to the Law is the obligation to love, which fulfils the Law (13:8-10). This obligation is parallel to that to live according to the Spirit (8:12). The love of God is poured out in our hearts through the gift of the Spirit (5:5) and it is through the power of the Spirit that we are enabled to fulfil the demands of the Law (8:4) and to put to death the sinful nature (8:5-8; 13:11-end). A renewed mind will tell us what we owe to others in the way of loving service and fulfilment of the duty to love will express our willingness to be living sacrifices.

In chapters 14 and 15, Paul deals with matters of conscience, in particular the eating of meat, which may have been offered in idol-worship before being put on sale in the market, an issue he also addressed in 1 Corinthians 8 - 10. This difference of opinion may reflect the division between Jew and Gentile Christians to which so much of the letter is addressed. The first principle he lays down is that the issue is one of "indifference", not affecting our salvation; it is "disputable" (14:1) and so different views may properly be held. Second, that since judgement belongs to God we are not entitled to judge the conduct of others over disputable issues (14:3-12). Third, the law of love obliges us to have regard for the conscience of those who differ from us (14:13; 15:2-3). Fourth, that we are to have regard to the common life and do all that builds up the Church (14:19).

Paul's concern for the unity of the Church is clear throughout the passage. To Gentiles unwilling to give way to Jewish scruples he points out that this is precisely what Jesus did (15:8). To Jews who find it difficult to accept Gentiles as fellow believers he quotes Scripture to show that Jesus' mission was to the Gentiles (15:9-12). Christ has accepted us as sinners (15:7) and we need to extend the same grace to others.

**Day 168. Psalm 121; Romans 15:14 - 16:end;
Acts 20:13-end**

A Completed Work

Psalm 121

The Lord our defender.

Romans 15:14-end

Paul did not know the Roman church personally and his experience with the Galatian and Corinthian churches had warned him that he could not take his reception for granted. In his summing up, therefore, he apologises for his boldness (15:14-15) but reminds them of the effectiveness of his apostolic ministry (15:16-17). He had proclaimed the gospel in word and deed and seen it confirmed by miracles and the power of the Holy Spirit (15:18-19). Wherever possible, he had preached where the gospel was previously unknown, and this task was now completed from Jerusalem through Asia Minor and into Greece (15:19,23). There were now churches in all these areas capable of taking on the work of proclaiming the gospel.

15:25-27 link this letter with Acts 19 and 20. Even before setting out, Paul knew his journey was a risky one (15:30-31). Although he did eventually get to Rome, it was not in the way he expected. There is nothing in the Bible about him ever travelling to Spain, but there is a tradition that he did he preach there between his first imprisonment (Acts 28) and his second (2 Timothy).

Romans 16

Although he did know the church as a whole, there were many individuals known to Paul who now lived in Rome, so his letter ends with a lengthy list of greetings. The greetings put paid to the idea that he did not value women or their ministry. Not only does he greet nine women, many in highly complimentary terms, but he commends Phoebe, describing her as *diakonos*, that is, a deacon of the church. "Junias" in verse 7 is otherwise unknown as a masculine name and N.R.S.V. correctly translates as the feminine "Junia", not only an apostle but an outstanding one. Priscilla and Aquila (16:3) had evidently returned to Rome since Acts 18:26, where they

had lived originally (Acts 18:2). Tertius (16:22) was the "amanuensis" or scribe to whom Paul dictated the letter.

Acts 20:13-end

We rejoin Paul on his journey to Jerusalem in company with several colleagues (20:4), including Luke himself. His speech to the elders of Ephesus has much in common with Romans 15. Here again is the sense of his work in Asia Minor and Greece completed. Here too is the sense of an obligation fully discharged. He has done everything possible to build up the church, teaching by word and example and warning of dangers to come. The responsibility now falls on their shoulders to take the work of God forward and to avoid the false teachers who had caused so many problems in Corinth and neighbouring Galatia.

The elders (20:17) are the same men (and possibly women) described as bishops or "overseers" in 20:28. The separation of these titles into two distinct "orders" of ministry is not known in the Bible, but in Philippians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3 there is a distinction between "bishops" and "deacons".

Day 169. Psalm 70; Acts 21:1 - 23:11

Paul and the Jews

Psalm 70

A prayer for vindication.

Acts 21:1 - 23:11

Paul travelled to Jerusalem with the group listed in 20:4 (Trophimus is mentioned in Jerusalem at 21:29). That Luke was also a member of the group is shown by the frequent use of "we" and "us". Hospitality was an important and expected part of Christian life, and even so big a group could expect to find somewhere to stay in every town they passed through (21:4,7,8,16; Romans 12:13; 1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:8; Hebrews 13:2; 1 Peter 4:9). Philip the evangelist is the Philip chosen as deacon in Acts 6:5 and active in evangelism in Acts 8. His career is an example of the flexibility of Christian ministry, and his daughters, with their gift of prophecy, are an example of the ministry of women in the New Testament Church.

Luke makes no mention of the gift which Paul was bringing from the Gentile churches to the Christians at Jerusalem. Although he records a polite welcome from James, the signs are that the church in Jerusalem was hostile to Paul. James speaks of thousands of Jewish Christians zealous for the Law (21:20), the sort with whom Paul had repeatedly clashed on his travels. Paul's group stayed with a man from Cyprus rather than a native of the city, and when he was arrested in the Temple carrying out James's request no attempt was made to give him help or support.

These chapters demonstrate the truth, which Paul himself constantly taught, that the Christian is called to follow his Lord in suffering (Acts 14:22; Romans 8:17; Colossians 1:24). Like Jesus, Paul was bound and handed over to the Gentiles (21:11). Like Jesus, he knew the dangers and was warned not to go (21:4; John 11:8,16). But like Jesus, his object was to accomplish his mission and the possibility of death was not allowed to stand in his way (20:22-24; 21:13; Luke 13:31-33). Like Jesus, he was falsely accused (21:28), his trial was conducted without regard for legal process (23:2-3) and the witnesses were unable to agree (23:6-9). Like Jesus, he faced the hostility of the mob (21:35-36). Paul did not see suffering as a set-back;

he expected it in the course of his ministry and looked for opportunities to witness through it.

Faced with the Jewish mob, Paul made no attempt to reason with them along the lines of his recent letter to Rome. Instead he gave his testimony, stressing his adherence to the Law and that of Ananias (22:3,12,17; 23:1) but equally his call direct from the glorified Jesus Christ (22:8-10,18,21).

Probably, the commander did not understand Aramaic and so did not follow what was going on or why the crowd again became enraged. It has been suggested that Paul was very short-sighted, which is why he failed to recognise the high priest (23:5). His declaration to the Sanhedrin (23:6) may have been meant to split them and secure his release by getting support from Pharisees, or simply to commend the Christian faith as the fulfilment of the Pharisaic interpretation of the Law (see 24:14-15; 26:6-7).

Day 170. Psalm 125; Acts 23:12 - 26:end

Paul on Trial

Psalm 125

A prayer for the Lord's protection.

Acts 23:12 - 26:end

The assurance of 23:11 that Paul would testify to Jesus in Rome was followed by a wait of over two years (24:27). After years of constant activity, not only travelling and preaching but working for a living, Paul had to adjust to confinement. After years of physical danger, he was now under Roman protection. The change in circumstances must have been difficult to cope with, but in his later letters Paul was able to say with confidence that he had learned to do just that by trust in God (Philippians 1:12-18; 4:11-13; 2 Timothy 2:9-10). By the time he appealed to Caesar, Paul had learned to see his imprisonment as something God could use to bring about his purposes.

The style of the speeches as Luke reports them, beginning with elaborate compliments, are typical of speeches before Roman tribunals. It is evident too that the various authorities had very different attitudes to the dispute and to Paul. Felix was knowledgeable and sympathetic, but weak enough to hope for a bribe or to wish to curry favour with the Jews. Festus also wanted to start his governorship with a gesture to get the Jews on his side, but he appears more cynical as well as being entirely ignorant of religious matters. Agrippa was knowledgeable and sympathetic and less beholden to Jewish opinion.

Why did Paul appeal to Caesar? He had been waiting in prison in Caesarea for two fruitless years and now a new governor was appointed who was evidently unsympathetic. Perhaps the appeal was made to avoid the dangers of having to stand trial in Jerusalem, which in Jesus' case had led to his death, and to ensure that he would be sent to Rome, even if as a prisoner. Justice decreed that Paul should be freed (26:32), but that was not what would have happened if Festus and the Jews had had their way (25:9).

Throughout his imprisonment, Paul used every opportunity to preach the gospel, stressing in particular the continuity between the hopes of the Pharisees (for the coming of Messiah and the resurrection) and Christian faith. The reason for the opposition of the Jews was his insistence that the Gentiles may also belong to God's people through faith in Jesus.

Day 171. Psalm 8; Acts 27 - 28

The Journey to Rome

Psalm 8

God's care for creation and all human life.

Acts 27 - 28

As in his journey to Jerusalem, Paul was accompanied by a team of fellow-workers. Aristarchus, whom Luke particularly mentions, had been seized by the mob in Ephesus (Acts 19:29), left Ephesus with Paul (20:4), and was a fellow prisoner with him at the time he wrote Colossians (Colossians 4:10).

Through Luke's detailed description of the journey and the shipwreck, we have the opportunity to observe the way Paul's desire to spread the gospel sprang from a natural human concern for others. In 27:21-26 he urged the crew and passengers to take courage; in 27:33-36 he provided food and encouraged everyone to eat; and in 28:3 he was helping to gather wood for the fire. His witness to the goodness of God was not forced but emerged naturally from the situation, strengthened by God-given opportunities such as the dream of 27:23-24 and the healing of Publius' father, which led to the gifts of the Maltese, through which the travellers must have recovered some of their lost property (28:7-10).

Paul's reception at Rome (28:14-15) contrasts greatly with that at Jerusalem (21:20-25). No wonder Paul "took courage" when members of the Roman church came out to meet him. He must have been in serious doubt as to whether he would be welcomed. Once in Rome, as was his practice, he went first to the Jews, gathering them to present his interpretation of the way the hopes expressed in the Law and the Prophets have been fulfilled through Jesus. Only when the Jews had heard and each made their own decision did he turn to the Gentiles.

By ending his book with Paul in Rome, Luke traces the progress of the gospel from Jerusalem through Judaea and Samaria, if not quite to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8) at least to the capital of the Empire. Writing in a time of persecution to someone whose name is perhaps disguised (Theophilus means simply "lover of God", Acts 1:1) he means to show that Paul's

preaching in Rome after his arrival was open and above board and that he was not guilty of any crime against the Romans.

The continuation of the story of the gospel's spread is up to the Church of each succeeding generation.
