

Encourage One Another As Servant Of Christ

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[0 : 0 0] Despite the fact that you had the whole of Acts 28 read to you tonight, I'm not going to preach on the whole of Acts 28, simply because I can't.

But I was assigned by Mr. Greenman, who divided this series up, a very mysterious passage, which is Acts 28, verses 11 to 16.

And I often wondered why he didn't add more to it, and I've had a lovely time trying to think that through. He suggested that in this, I mean, this is what you call Greenman exegesis at this point, that in this passage we encounter the church at Rome.

Well, judging by what we all know of the church at Rome, this is a very limited passage indeed, to give full scope to that magnificent subject.

However, I'm delighted to have the chance to do it. And the theme that is to come from this sermon tonight is encouragement.

[1 : 1 4] And if you look carefully at the passage, you will find indeed it does refer to encouragement in verse 15.

It also refers to three taverns. And I thought, well, that's a good subject. We could preach on three taverns.

And if you had to pick your favorite three taverns, which would they be? That I don't think would be very productive, but it's there.

And with a little imaginative exegesis, you could no doubt yield something out of that. However, I'm not going to concentrate on the three taverns, though they are of great interest to me and I think have something to do with the nature of this passage, particularly the whole of this chapter, which has to do with, I think it has a lot to do with Christian hospitality and how Christian hospitality works.

Well, the thing that I do want to tell you about, just to get you first to look at the passage fairly carefully, you will know that they left Malta in verse 11.

[2 : 3 6] And Malta is a little island which is just south of Sicily. And having spent three months there and enjoyed great hospitality, so that when they sailed, their boat was loaded with things that they needed by the people of the island of Malta.

It reminds me of the passage this morning where Jesus commands his disciples to go out with one pair of sandals and one tunic and no purse and one staff and to take nothing with them.

Well, Paul and his following were able to do that exactly according to the prescription and they were heavy with the presentations of those among whom they had lived for three months.

Hospitality, as you know it now, means that after about three days, people are glad to get rid of you and hope you don't take anything with you. Here, quite the reverse is the case where they went after three months and they were weighed down with the gifts they had.

They set sail in a ship which had wintered in the island, a ship of Alexandria. If you go back to 27.6, you will see that Paul had already set out in a ship of Alexandria and had been subject to a storm and shipwreck and had only been saved by the grace of God.

[4 : 13] Well, so they set out in another ship from Alexandria. And I would like to put to the keener Bible students among you the question of why Luke sees fit to include in the description of the ship of Alexandria the statement that it had the twin brothers as a figurehead and the prow of the ship.

And the twin brothers are the Greek or Roman gods, Castor and Pollux, who were supposed to be the patron gods, I guess, of sailors.

And why Luke bothers to mention this, I don't know. I have worked out a theory, if you'd like, which is completely fatuous, but I'll tell it to you anyway.

Castor and Pollux, where Castor was immortal and Pollux was mortal.

And in due course, in the course of the battle, Pollux was murdered. And being mortal, he died. But Castor went on his behalf to the panel of the gods and asked that he might share his immortality with Pollux, his twin brother.

[5 : 38] So the gods agreed to give him immortality, and so they took turns in heaven. One was there one day, and the other was there the next. And they just switched days down through the whole of eternity, I guess, as they saw it.

But it's a strange statement. It's a strange statement in that the twins are the constellation, the Gemini, which all of you who are astronomers know about.

And those of you who, I hope, abhor astrology, properly abhor astrology, will recognize this to be the third sign of the zodiac, these twin brothers.

And so it's a strange sort of allusion that Luke makes in writing this story. And this ship that they set sail in from Alexandria and went to Syracuse, which was the capital, I guess, of the eastern half of the island of Sicily, and they stayed there for three days.

And then from there, they made a circuit and arrived at Regium, which I'm told, if any of you know, southern Italy is Regio Calabria now.

[7 : 01] And they stayed there for one day. And then a south wind sprang up, and on the second day, they went to that other Italian place that is mentioned at the end of verse 13.

And which I won't, if there's anybody here who speaks Italian, I'd be glad to have you help me as to how you pronounce that. But for the moment, we'll just call it that place in southern Italy.

There we, when they got there, however, they found, now this journey that they had taken thus far was a significant journey, and the Bible atlas tells us that they sailed through the Straits of Messina.

They sailed between Scylla and Charybdis, which were apparently, it's a kind of ripple rock place. If any of you are old BC types, you all know about ripple rock.

But anyway, there was a vortex in the water on one side and a rock on the other, and you had disaster on your left and disaster on your right. And they managed to survive that and come to this city in southern Italy.

[8 : 17] And there we found brethren. Now, the brethren were, the Christians in the New Testament are called the brethren, the saints, the beloved, and the disciples.

All those names. And all those names refer to people who knew and understood themselves to be Christians. That they were distinctively the disciples of Jesus Christ.

They were the saints of God. They were the beloved of God. And they were brethren, one of another in Christ. And so they had this very real sense of who they are.

And it's this, I mean, we can't do that now, I guess. We are all so divided by denominations and various other things that the sense of cohesion, which obviously belonged to these people, they knew themselves to be the brethren.

And they knew this relationship to one another. That doesn't seem to belong to us. When Paul writes to the Galatians, you know, do good unto all men, and especially unto them that are of the household of faith.

[9 : 45] People understood what the responsibility of being brethren was. And so they went and they met Paul. and they were invited to stay with them over a Sabbath.

And so they had, I don't know how Paul persuaded the centurion, who presumably was still in charge of this party, since they were a party of prisoners that were being escorted to Rome.

He persuaded the centurion to wait there for seven days over a Christian Sabbath so they could celebrate that day together.

And so they did. And then the brethren, they came to Rome. The brethren there, when they heard of us, came as far as the Forum of Appius and three taverns to meet us.

So having left this city in southern Italy, they carried on by foot now. And they came about 40 to 50 miles from Rome.

[10 : 59] And there they were met by a party of the brethren. And then they went another distance and came to another, perhaps, stopping place for the night.

And another party of the brethren met with them. And so they, it became a very happy occasion. And they, on seeing them, it says, Paul thanked God and took courage.

Because Paul was, as you know, under sentence to go before Caesar as he had been forced to plead that he would be tried by Caesar.

Now he was coming up against that moment. there would be for him, as I'm sure there would be for us, some sense of dread in facing this.

And yet, he was encouraged and thanked God because of the brethren at the church of Rome who came and encouraged them. And it says, when we came into Rome, Matthew Henry in his commentary points out that they came along the Apian Way and that this way had seen many wonderful parades as great Roman generals had come back with conquests and prisoners and the booty of war and had had a magnificent procession being met by all the populace of Rome that came out to meet them and to share in their victory and to see the soldiers back and the veterans back from their long years of battle and to welcome them home and they marched in triumph up the Apian Way to Rome.

[12 : 55] While here you have a man who was a prisoner with several other prisoners, a small detachment of soldiers from the Roman province of Judea escorting them having been shipwrecked and having had a very difficult time indeed and they, this very motley crew make their way up the same Apian Way to a victory which outranks and outshines anything that had ever happened on that procession route before and ever would happen again.

This was the most amazing procession of victory that could be imagined in terms of the kingdom that was being established and the triumph that had been won and the victory that had been claimed through Jesus Christ as Lord in their lives and so they marched on Rome having gone from Jerusalem to the uttermost parts of the earth which Rome would represent to them in those days and so it was for Paul a time of thanking God and taking great courage.

Well, if you think a little bit about who it was that met Paul and I just turned to the 16th chapter of Romans and it's a passage that that I really love because it's so full of people and it's an amazing catalog of people and Paul had already written this letter to the church in Rome and as he closes the letter which was a magnificent theological treatise that has shaped the direction of the world for two centuries in many ways but he ends it with with chapter 16 and let me just read it for you.

I commend to you our sister Phoebe in the 20th century she's a great champion of women's rights and the ordination of women but there she is back in Romans chapter 16 a deaconess in the church.

that you may receive her in the Lord. Verse 3 Priscilla and Aquila whom Paul had worked with and had met in Corinth and they were then at least in Rome and they had risked their necks as we're told and they had a church meeting in their house that is they had a home Bible study group in the fullest sense of the word I guess and then there's Eponetus who was the first convert in Asia for Christ and there was Mary who had worked hard among them and Adronicus and Junius Paul's kinsmen and fellow prisoners because they were imprisoned for Christ and there they were men of note among the apostles the apostles that were in Christ Paul says before him and Ampliatus my beloved in the

[16:19] Lord and Urbanus our fellow worker in Christ and my beloved Stachys greet Apellus who is approved in Christ greet those who belong to the family of Aristobulus greet my kinsman Herodian greet those in the Lord who belong to the family of Narcissus it's interesting to note the Roman and the Greek names greet those workers in the Lord Trypheni and Tryphosa greet thy beloved greet the beloved Persis who has worked hard in the Lord greet Rufus eminent in the Lord also his mother and mine greet Asyncretus Phlegion Hermes Patrobus Hermas and their brethren who are with them Philologus Julia Nereus and his sister

Olympus and all the saints who are with them greet one another with a holy kiss all the churches of Christ greet you so Paul now presumably among those who came down to meet him had all these people coming to see him because he had written to them and told them and so you begin to see that the Christian community was made up of people who had been distinctively called and distinctively set apart and who had been who had exercised distinguished service for Christ already and were still in the first generation of Christians and these people had offered amazing had already won for themselves distinction in the service of Christ and for that are acknowledged in the end of Romans chapter 16 and you know

I would like to I wish that we could have this love and respect for one another and know one another in the Lord in this peculiar way and recognize the bond of that we have one with another in Christ and be able to commend and greet and embrace one another in the sense of honoring one another because of because of being called to be together the servants of Christ I mean I look at this congregation seated before me tonight and there's some great people here that I know there's probably even greater ones that I don't know and all of you with I don't know if it's all of you but many of you with distinguished service for Christ and with a name by which

I guess a name which in Christ you are deserving of deep respect by those who are with you in the obedience of faith but it's a lovely thing isn't it I mean the personal bonding that is here between Paul and all these people and the response to Paul's coming of them coming out to meet him and walking the 30 or 40 or 50 miles down the road from Rome towards the sea coast in order to meet him and join in this triumphal procession as this leading apostle comes as a prisoner but even though a prisoner in some kind of triumph into the city of Rome and the fact that it's you know the fact that there are people who are involved while he was in prison in that house that is spoken of in chapter chapter 28 there he wrote the letter to the Colossians from there he wrote the letter to Philemon from there he wrote the letter to the Ephesians it's probable within the realm of

New Testament studies to conjecture that he may well have written the letters to Timothy and Titus from this same prison house that he ends up in here in this chapter it was here that he entertained Aristarchus it was here that he entertained Epaphras who was the younger disciple who had gone and taken the gospel from Ephesus up the valley into the mountains to the three cities around Colossi and the churches were established up there it was possible that it was to this house in Rome to which the runaway slave Onesimus came and there he was converted through talking with Paul I wonder about the soldier who had to guard Paul as to how he tolerated all this and where he ended up whose army he belonged to by the end of this tour of duty but it's an amazing story of how this focus of vibrant life built on vibrant relationships to people who had come wonderfully alive through their faith in

[22 : 16] Christ and knew themselves to belong to him I don't know what you make of this but as David read that passage for us tonight it was very interesting wasn't it that he when he had been in this place for two days which is hardly time enough to arrange the furniture probably he could arrange all the furniture he had anyway but before he had been there two days he called all the Jewish elders of Rome together and worked them over very well indeed and they were totally surprised by what he had to say and they scratched their heads and say well nobody sent us word that you were coming and we don't quite know what to make of you and then they turned away from him and Paul says those very uncomfoting words as he waves them goodbye and quotes

Isaiah to them and says what alas I suppose we have to go on saying in a world like ours when when he had finished speaking speaking to them he says in verse 25 and 26 following Paul says goodbye to the Jewish elders of the synagogues in Rome and he says the Holy Spirit was right in saying to your fathers through Isaiah the prophet go to this people and say you shall indeed hear but never understand you shall indeed see but never perceive for this people's hearts have grown dull and their ears are heavy of hearing and their eyes they have closed lest they should perceive with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn for me to heal them that it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles they will listen and so it remains that we live in a world of those who will hear and those who won't hear the gospel and the responsibility of declaring the gospel boldly was Paul's special responsibility but Paul had around him a great company of wonderful people who were his brethren for whom he thanked

God and from whom he derived great courage in the work that he was called upon to do the very significant work which was his ministry from this home in the city of Rome where he was a prisoner for two years under the most adverse circumstances humanly though he was in bonds as he says in Colossians the gospel was not bound and it went on to people and touched people's hearts and lives and brought them to faith and trust in the hearing and receiving of the gospel even though there was many who didn't hear and wouldn't receive it so I commend that passage to you and pray that you may thank God and take great courage from it as you see the nature of the battle and the nature of the company of people among whom you are to work and to whom you are to to whom you are to exercise the love and the care and the hospitality and the thoughtfulness and the prayerfulness one for another that you might be a great encouragement to others and that they may thank God for you as you carry on in the work to which you are called in Christ Amen