

## HIS OWN RENTED HOUSE

Acts 28:1-31

Key Verses: 28:30,31

**"For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ."**

Happy New Year! Many celebrations happened around the world as a new year and new decade began. For Christians, it's an exciting time to reflect on God's work over the past year and make a fresh start with new decisions of faith.

This week I visited Kanazawa to attend the Japanese directors' conference. God blessed the conference so much and my heart was refreshed to serve God with new fighting spirit this year. Today I'd like to think about one of the passages we studied. It's about Paul's life in Rome. I pray that Paul's example will encourage us and give us spiritual direction for 2010.

Looking back a few chapters, we see that Paul was arrested in Jerusalem for preaching about Jesus. Though he pleaded his case well, the Jews insisted he be killed. As a Roman citizen, Paul demanded he be brought before Caesar Augustus to plead his case. So, bound in chains, Paul was put on a ship and began sailing for Rome. The journey wasn't easy. It was already winter and the weather was rough. In total, 276 passengers were on the boat. During one storm, they needed to throw some food overboard to keep the ship from sinking. People were starving. Finally, they were shipwrecked and needed to swim to shore. It seemed everyone would die. But God's mighty and graceful hand of protection was upon them as he remembered his promise to Paul: **"Do not be afraid, Paul. You must stand trial before Caesar; and God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you."** (Acts 27:24) Not one person died in the shipwreck. God led everyone safely to the island of Malta, located about 300km south of Italy.

Verses 1-10 in today's passage describe some events which happened during their stay in Malta. Paul was bitten by a poisonous snake but he didn't die. The chief of the island, Publius', father became sick but through prayer and touch Paul healed him. After that everyone who was sick on the island came to Paul to be healed. This went on for three months and everyone gave thanks to Paul. Paul was a great source of blessing to the people of Malta. He served humbly, with love and faith. Finally, when the winter was over, the locals gave him everything he needed, including a new ship, to continue sailing to Rome. Paul didn't need to worry about anything. God was his provider.

From Malta, Paul travelled to Syracuse and then up the west coast of Italy to Rome. Along the way, he was greeted by many Christians who welcomed him and encouraged him. If it were Japan, we guess Paul would first go to Nagasaki and spend time with M. David and his family. He would travel above Kita-Kyuusyuu and down the coast visiting the Oita centre and Daniel's house in Oozai and Sam's house down the road. From there,

he would travel up to Honsyuu, visiting the Osaka centre and finally arriving in Tokyo where he would be greeted by all the brothers and sisters there, including some who traveled far to visit Tokyo and eat sushi together. Paul would be greatly encouraged by our lives of faith and to see fellow Christians sharing the gospel in Japan.

Paul had longed for a long time to visit Rome. He had already written his letter to the Romans with the hope that he could see them one day. Finally, he arrived. But he didn't get there in a way he may have hoped such as airplane or shinkansen. Paul arrived in Rome as a prisoner in chains. How did he view his situation? Look at verse 20. **"For this reason I have asked to see you and talk with you. It is because of the hope of Israel that I am bound with this chain."** Paul didn't despair because of his chains. Instead, he saw he was bound by them because of the hope of Israel. "The hope of Israel" has deep meaning. God had promised the people of Israel that he would send them a messiah. For thousands of years they struggled to serve God. For 400 years, they were slaves in Egypt under Pharaoh. When they turned their hearts against God, God punished them and gave them over to the Babylonians for exile during 70 years. Now the Jews were oppressed harshly under the Roman Empire. They really longed for the messiah to come. Maybe they sang, "O come, O come Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel..." Paul was a Jew and he hoped for the messiah like them. The hope of Israel was the hope of a messiah -- that is, the hope of Jesus Christ. Paul was in chains because of Jesus.

Unlike Paul, we are not in physical chains. We live peacefully in Japan with many freedoms. However, life in Japan can be challenging. School is busy. Caring for children is busy. Working is busy. Serving the ministry is busy. Finding a full time job is stressful. Sometimes life's struggles can feel like chains. We want to be removed from them as quickly as possible and have an easier life. But Paul's view toward life was different. Paul knew he was struggling because of Jesus. Paul was a sinner who even murdered Christians. But Jesus appeared to him, forgave his sins, and saved his life. Paul never forgot Jesus' grace to him. He wrote, **"But by the grace of God I am what I am."** (1 Cor 15:10) Jesus gave Paul the world mission command to preach the gospel all the way to Rome. That's why Paul was there. He went in chains so he could learn Christ's suffering more deeply and know Christ's grace more personally. Similarly, when we know the grace of Jesus, we can see deep spiritual meaning in our suffering. God has a reason for our suffering. Romans 5:3-5 say, **"Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us."**

The Jews were excited to hear more from Paul as Christianity was becoming a hot topic in Rome. Maybe they were intrigued by his mysterious joy despite being a prisoner. So they arranged a time to come visit Paul in his prison house. Look at verse 23. **"They arranged to meet Paul on a certain day, and came in even larger numbers to the place where he was staying. From morning till evening he explained and declared to them the kingdom of God and tried to convince them about Jesus from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets."** Paul loved the Jewish people. From morning till evening, he laboured hard to teach each person one by one about God's kingdom and

explain how Jesus fulfilled all the Messianic Scripture given through Moses and the Prophets. We guess he taught about repentance, Jesus' death on the cross, and resurrection and ascension into heaven. Surely Paul focussed on God's love and grace to the people of Israel throughout history which culminated in God's giving his own Son to them for their salvation. What a heart moving bible study it must have been!

Some were convinced and others didn't believe. But Paul didn't despair. Instead he saw it as the fulfillment of Scripture given through Isaiah the prophet. God's chosen people had hardened their hearts. But God didn't give up. Instead, God used it like a rudder on a boat to change the direction of redemptive history. Until then, God had worked largely through the people of Israel. But now the door was opening up to the Gentiles who would listen to and accept the gospel with genuine faith and repentance. In this way, the gospel would spread to all people of the earth. Paul could foresee God's world salvation plan and flow of history because he studied the bible. I pray that in 2010 we may also be inspired to study the bible diligently like Paul.

Look at verses 30,31. **"For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ."** Paul stayed at least two more years in Rome. He had his own rented house which meant that he worked a job to support himself. Though Paul was a Roman citizen, he had grown up in Jerusalem where he studied to be a Pharisee. Rome was a foreign culture for him. He didn't know many people and it could be easy to feel isolated. Although Paul looked like other Romans, inside he was different and the message he should share with them was very new to them. Paul was a great man of God who had served for many years. We guess he could relax and enjoy his quiet life by himself in his house with his money. But Paul's heart was on fire to share the gospel. He had no big church building or fancy technology. But Paul used his home as a bible house. Paul opened his doors and welcomed everyone to come and see his private home life. Paul made tea for them and gave them delicious snacks. Paul shared boldly and freely about Jesus and God's kingdom.

From the world's point of view, one missionary teaching the bible from his home seemed insignificant. Compared to Caesar and the Roman Empire, an old man who was a prisoner in chains seemed to be nothing. But God watched Paul and God blessed Paul's bible studies richly. Because of Paul's house church, the gospel history was changed. All 275 people on his boat were saved. After a few hundred years, Rome was declared a Christian Empire under Constantine I. During these two years, Paul wrote several prison and personal letters which are in the bible: Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians, and Philemon. Later, he wrote 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus which continue to shape the lives of millions of Christians today. In Philippians, Paul wrote that the whole Roman palace guard heard his testimony that he was in chains for Christ (Phil 1:13)

Paul's house church is a good example of how God has blessed house churches throughout history. Of course, there are countless others. Around fifty years ago Sarah Barry went to South Korea as an American missionary. She was one person. Korea was coming out of a civil war and many people were hungry and hopeless. But she opened

her home to study the bible with Korean students. She loved them with Jesus' love and now thousands of Koreans have met Jesus as their personal saviour and so many have been sent out as Christian missionaries around the world.

We don't need special materials or abilities to serve God. In Oita, we don't even have someone who knows how to play music. This house belongs to Tsukasa's father, not us. Though we have little, God will use our house church to change the history of this nation. May God help us to open our home and invite people to learn about Jesus and God's kingdom. May God raise up many house churches like Paul's until Oita becomes a bible believing city.