

## WHAT AN ANTICLIMAX!

**Today's Text: Acts 28: 11-31**

### **Extracts:**

*Now when we came to Rome, the centurion delivered the prisoners to the captain of the guard; but Paul was permitted to dwell by himself with the soldier who guarded him. And it came to pass after three days that Paul called the leaders of the Jews together... and said to them, "Men and brethren, though I have done nothing against our people or the customs of our fathers, yet, I was delivered as a prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans, who, when they had examined me, wanted to let me go, because there was no cause for putting me to death." ...Then they said to him, "We neither received letters from Judea concerning you, nor have any of the brethren who came reported or spoken any evil of you. But we desire to hear from you what you think..." Then Paul dwelt two whole years in his own rented house, and received all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God [Acts 28: 16-18, 21-22, 30-31]*

*The US Presidential Elections were held on Tuesday, 6 November 2012.<sup>1</sup> President Barack Obama, seeking re-election as the Democratic candidate, faced a very formidable opponent, multimillionaire ex-Governor Mitt Romney, the Republican challenger, who paraded his private sector experience as the panacea for dealing with the ailing economy. Pundits and pollsters predicted that it would be a close race and the winner might not be known early. Romney was so confident of victory that he audaciously opened a web site with the title, "Mitt Romney Elected the 45<sup>th</sup> President of the United States of America." But, by 11.00 p.m. (EST) on election night, Obama was already projected the outright winner- with a landslide victory in the Electoral College votes (62%-final count) and a comfortable majority of the popular votes. What an anticlimax!*

*How often have you found yourself in a similar situation? The odds are piled up against you. For example, the bills are mounting but the deadlines are pressing; you want a child very badly but menopause is knocking at your door! Fear not because you will soon experience an anticlimax. In this week's Bible story, Paul was brought to Rome as a prisoner from Jerusalem but on arrival, it was an unexpected happy ending! The Lord has a similar ending to your high-wire situation. Therefore, this week's study is for you.*

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<sup>1</sup> Based on own observations, supplemented with the following sources: Emma Margolin, "Website for President-elect Mitt Romney goes live," 11/08/12, <http://tv.msnbc.com/2012/11/08/website-for-president-elect-mitt-romney-goes-live/> , Beth Fouhy, "GOP groups taking stock after \$380 million loss," 11/8/12, <http://news.msn.com/politics/gop-groups-taking-stock-after-dollar380-million-loss> , and Samuel P. Jacobs, "Republican strategist Karl Rove's very bad night," 11/8/12, <http://news.msn.com/politics/republican-strategist-karl-roves-very-bad-night-3>

## 1. Background: From prisoner to tenant!

How often have you found yourself in a situation when you think giving up is getting better than continuing to fight an “unwinnable” war? You are bruised and battered. Your reputation has been so soiled that even dry cleaners cannot launder it! Your hope has been raised and shattered too often to matter any longer. For example, I know of a church member that had suffered from sickle cell anaemia for so long. As the pains came again one day, he said to those who were praying for him, “I am tired of fighting. I just want to die!” Do you want to die? Do you want to give up? *Is it not possible that you are near the end of the long rough road? Is it not possible that the end of it all will be an anticlimax, that is, an outcome that is unexpectedly pleasant and satisfying, and a dramatic irony? When such a moment comes, you may feel great relief and wonder what the fuss was all about. This week’s study will put you in that state with respect to your current situation.*

You will recall the multiple trials that Paul had passed through in Judea from the moment he showed up in Jerusalem after his third missionary journey. Without any opportunity to defend himself, the mob almost lynched him until Roman soldiers rescued him [Acts 21: 26-40]. When the soldiers tried to treat him like a common trouble-maker in a distant colonial outpost, he let them know that he was a Roman citizen who had to be regarded innocent until proved guilty. That prompted them to bring him for a formal trial before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish council [Acts 22: 1-30]. When the soldiers feared for his safety, they took him under the cover of night to the Roman governor of that province, Felix, who lived in Caesarea [Acts 23: 11-35]. Felix knew that the Jews had no case against Paul, neither did Rome. But he feared to let him go in order to protect his own political position among the Jews. Even so, he expected Paul to bribe him to set him free! In the end, he kept Paul in prison for two years and handed him over to his own successor, Festus [Acts 24: 1-27]. Festus was not any better. He dilly-dallied and that forced Paul to appeal to Caesar in Rome [Acts 25: 1-12]. We know what happened on the way to Rome. There was a storm but Paul and his fellow prisoners were saved by the mercy of God on him [Acts 27].

In this week’s Bible story, we come across Paul on his arrival in Rome. You can imagine what was passing through his mind that moment. His ordeal had been long and unending. He had suffered tribulations, needs and distresses. Imprisonments, sleeplessness and hunger had been his trademarks [2 Cor. 6: 4-5]. Yes, the Lord had assured him that he was going to Rome to witness for Him there as he had done in Jerusalem [Acts 23: 11] but the human mind can wander far and wide! He was still a prisoner, remember? Let us find out what followed:

a) *Paul’s fame arrived Rome before he did!*

After what happened during the tempest, Julius, a centurion of the Augustan Regiment, treated Paul kindly. The soldiers’ plan was to kill all

the prisoners so that they should not swim to safety and escape but “the centurion, wanting to save Paul, kept them from their purpose” [[Acts 27: 1, 42-43]. After three months on the island of Malta, the centurion put his prisoners on an Alexandrian ship on their way to Rome. Meanwhile, word of Paul’s coming had spread to believers up to Appii Forum and Three Points, just south of Rome. They came out to meet him and *when “Paul saw them, he thanked God and took courage”* [Acts 28: 11-15].

That was unexpected. Such a reception is extended to dignitaries, not prisoners. But Paul was going to Rome as Christ’s ambassador. Therefore, he was a dignitary. *When you stand on the path of truth and righteousness in the name of Jesus Christ, you are His ambassador. When your enemies see you, you will find favour in their sight.* Paul saw a crowd of brethren, not an angry mob that he had become accustomed to. He thanked God and took courage. His stagger began to turn into a swagger! What an anticlimax!

*b) On arrival, Paul lived with the prison guard, not in prison!*

On arrival in Rome, “the centurion delivered the prisoners to the captain of the guard; but Paul was permitted to dwell by himself with the soldier who guarded him” [v. 16]. That was another pleasant surprise! When a prisoner dwells in the residence of the prison guard, is he still in prison? The centurion appeared to have spoken wonderful things about Paul to his military colleague. Otherwise, how would you bring an unknown prisoner, a possible criminal, into your home to live with you and your family? Would it not be dangerous? But the captain of the guard was not afraid because God’s favour was on his guest. I am sure Paul again thanked God and took courage. What an anticlimax!

*c) The Jews in Rome had no case of appeal from Jerusalem against Paul!*

Let us not get carried away. Paul remained a prisoner on appeal to Caesar. Perhaps, trying to size up the enemy, he sent for the leaders of the Jews in Rome to find out what they knew about his case. When they had come together, he told them the story of his innocence. He had done nothing against his people or the customs of their fathers deserving of death. Yet, he had been delivered as a prisoner into the hands of the Romans. When his own people back home were not prepared to let him go, in spite of his innocence, he had had to appeal to Caesar. Concluding, he said, “For this reason therefore I have called for you, to see you and speak with you, because for the hope of Israel I am bound with this chain” [vv. 17-20].

To his pleasant surprise, the Jewish leaders affirmed that they had neither received letters from Judea concerning him nor had any of the brethren reported or spoken any evil of him. However, they desired to hear from

him what he thought because they had heard much spoken against “this sect” everywhere. They then appointed a day when many of them would come to Paul’s lodging. When they came, he used the opportunity to preach and testify to them about the kingdom of God “from morning till evening” [vv. 21-23].

Another pleasant surprise! *If the Jews in Rome were not against him and nobody from Judea came with an evil report about him to Rome, then he was not there as a prisoner but to fulfil what the Lord had shown him in a vision, namely, that Paul would bear witness for Him at Rome* [Acts 23: 11]. Things were beginning to fall in place for him; to look clearer and clearer. What an anticlimax!

d) *Paul became a tenant in Rome!*

After “two whole years” in Rome, Paul’s appeal to Caesar had not been listed for hearing! So, he rented a house “and received all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ with all confidence, no one forbidding him” [Acts 28: 30-31]. *Paul who had been running from pillar to post in Judea and among the Gentiles had become a tenant in Rome, the then capital of the world- free to preach Christ, no one forbidding him!* What an anticlimax!

From the foregoing, we can see God’s hand in the whole matter. Jesus had chosen Paul as His vessel to bear His name “before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel.” Nevertheless He would also show Paul how many things he had to suffer for Christ’s sake [Acts 9: 15-16]. *Paul’s journey from Damascus to Rome was long, circuitous and tortuous. But it ended well- against Paul’s expectations.* What an anticlimax!

## 2. Lessons for the agitated heart

We have a great deal to learn from Paul’s life and story and here are some notable ones:

a) *Those benefitting from your discomfort will never give up!*

Right from Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus up to his arrival in Rome, he had no respite from his enemies and detractors. To escape from Damascus, the disciples there had to let him down through the wall in a large basket by night [Acts 9: 23-25]. At his trial in Jerusalem, after his arrest and thorough beating in the temple there, they were still not happy that he did not die in their hands. So, some zealots bound themselves with an oath to “neither eat nor drink till they had killed Paul” [Acts 23: 12].

As long as Paul was alive and kept succeeding, their failure kept being magnified. So do your detractors see you!

***Those who envy you will only stop when you stop succeeding!*** Even so, they will still laugh at your failure. That is because evil people are agents of Satan who is fuelled by failure to do more damage. For example, when the great dragon, “that serpent of old called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world,” was cast out of heaven, he was enraged that he could not defeat the woman that gave birth to the male child [symbolic of Mary and Jesus]. What did he then do? We are told, “He went to make war with the rest of her offspring, who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ” [Rev. 12: 9, 13-17].

Therefore, once God has given you the road map and the outcome of your mission for Him, do not look back because those who are trying to stop you cannot be appeased- except by your failure! So, do not indulge them.

*b) The worst opponent to fight is a weakling!*

The early converts to Christianity were the lowly and downtrodden of society- slaves, servants and maids. So, when Paul, an erudite scholar and a Pharisee joined them, he was seen as lending influence and connections to a wrong cause. Therefore, when his opponents went for him, they did not expect any obstacles or resistance because they saw him as a weakling. What they did not know or reckon with was the assurance given to him by the Lord in a vision, “Do not be afraid, but speak, and do not keep silent; for I am with you, and no one will attack you to hurt you; for I have many people in this city” [Acts 18: 9-10]. You can then imagine his opponents’ helplessness when the Roman authorities took him (a Roman citizen) away from their control. So will your opponents find when they take you on because ***He that is in you is greater than he that is in the world [1 Jn 4: 4]***.

Look at the case of Haman who was hell-bent on destroying Mordecai and the Jews during the reign of the Persian king, Ahasuerus. The king had promoted Haman to a point where he was “above all the princes who were with him.” Mordecai, on the other hand, was one of the servants at the king’s gate. Just because Mordecai the Jew refused to bow down or pay homage to him as commanded by the king, Haman decided to destroy all the Jews in that kingdom [Esth. 3: 1-6]. But what he did not know was that Queen Esther, the king’s wife, was the daughter of Mordecai’s uncle and he had raised her as his own daughter when her parents died [Esth. 2:7]! In the end, Haman wound up destroying himself and his family and his estate was transferred to Mordecai [Esth. 8: 1-2]!

It is quite possible that Paul remained apprehensive on arrival in Rome- even with the warm reception that he had received. But after two whole years, his case had not been called nor heard. What did he do? He rented a house and began to do his missionary work among the Romans, *while waiting*. In like manner, you must realize that winning a battle does not mean that you have won the war. For example, President Obama has won re-election. As he thanked his young field workers for their extraordinary dedication, the usually calm and stoic Obama could not help shedding tears. His victory was an anticlimax. But his political opponents have not given up, in spite of their unanticipated heavy losses. They will regroup and set new traps for him until his second term ends in 2016. Therefore, he cannot afford to let down his guards. It is not over until it is over. So, you must continue to be on your guard.

### 3. Conclusion: What an anticlimax!

As Jesus hung on the cross that first Good Friday, His believers were scattered and disoriented. The One that they had come to accept as the Messiah and the King of the Jews was dying there and looking helpless. Even His detractors blasphemed Him, saying, "If You are the Son of God, come down from the cross" [Matt. 27: 39-40]. But on that first glorious Easter morning, when Mary Magdalene came to the tomb to anoint the body of the dead Jesus, she found it empty. Soon after, Jesus revealed Himself to her and said, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell My brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see Me" [Matt. 28:1-10]. Can you imagine how Mary Magdalene felt that moment? I can hear her muttering, "You mean He is not dead? You mean we have won? You mean ...?" What an anticlimax!

As you journey in your earthly body through this wicked world, always remember that Satan's aim is to make you miss that crown that Jesus has promised every faithful believer in Him. Satan will fail if you refuse to co-operate with him. Just as God cannot force you to worship Him, the devil cannot also force you to obey him. Therefore, the popular saying, "Satan made me do it," does not hold water. Jesus is standing right now at the door of your heart. If you hear Him and open the door to give your life FULLY to Him, you will have access to His banquet in His Father's kingdom. Can you imagine that glorious day, when this hard life is over and you behold the glory that awaits you in God's kingdom?

That will be your ultimate anticlimax!