



The Online Library of T. Austin-Sparks

Published as a PDF by Austin-Sparks.net
Email: info@austin-sparks.net

In keeping with T. Austin-Sparks' wishes that what was freely received should be freely given and not sold for profit, and that his messages be reproduced word for word, we ask if you choose to share these messages with others, to please respect his wishes and offer them freely - free of any changes, free of any charge (except necessary distribution costs) and with this statement included.

"And So We Came To Rome"

by T. Austin-Sparks

First published in "A Witness and A Testimony" magazine, Sep-Oct 1951, Vol 29-5.

Reading: Rom. 1:10-15; 15:22-24,32; Acts 19:21; Acts 27, 28.

"And so we came to Rome" (Acts 28:14).

An Earthly Objective with Heavenly Significance

It is not a new idea that Paul's journey to Rome can be taken as not only the record of a journey but as representing spiritual factors in relation to the way of God with His Church in this dispensation, and perhaps especially the closing phase of the Church's history on earth, in that this journey represents the closing phase of the Apostle Paul's life. The interpretations vary, but the key to most of them is that the ship in which Paul travelled to Rome is a type of the Church and of its ultimate disintegration at the end of the dispensation. I do not find myself able to accept that interpretation, though not discountenancing altogether a typical interpretation of the journey. However, let us move to the positive side.

I will mention five aspects of this account which may be taken as typical of the Church's history. First of all, there are Paul and his companions - Aristarchus of Macedonia, and Luke - and I think *they* represent the Church. Then there is the ship, and that to my mind represents all such man-made means employed by God for the reaching of His ends. Then there is the sea, and frequently in the Word of God the sea is symbolical of the world of mankind. Further, there is the ship's company, and undoubtedly they speak of men of the world more or less affected by the Church, and affecting the Church. Finally there are the elements, which are very stormy and openly malignant, and sometimes apparently very benign; but whether in open revolt or quiet and

apparently helpful, they are always hostile. That sums up the features of this story, but we come to the real message which lies in the heart of it.

The Objective - The Church and its Heavenly Function

We have first of all to get its setting in the large realm of Divine thoughts, and that is related to the end in view for the Church. The objective here literally was Rome - the long-standing and intense desire of the Apostle to see Rome and to be with the saints there for spiritual values. Now we know that it was from Rome that he wrote those letters which, perhaps more than anything else in all the dispensations, have been for the enrichment of God's people. It was from Rome that he wrote the letters to the Ephesians, Colossians and Philipppians, and there is little doubt, I think, that much in those letters was derived from Paul's visit to Rome itself. A man of such alertness to everything that was going on around him, of such keen interest and so observant, was not likely to fail to be impressed by Rome as the capital city and centre of that great worldwide empire, with all that Rome actually meant and represented on this earth and in this world. He was, I think, without doubt greatly impressed, and was taking up a very great deal of what he saw there and with which he came into touch, passing it through that wonderful spiritual mind of his, and converting it to spiritual account; for when we find him writing from Rome, his letters have so much in them, in the spiritual and vaster realm, of what was, in its limited and earthly way, true of Rome itself.

There, for instance, was the great centre of government for this world. Rule was world-wide in Rome. There was a universality about that centre of government, there was a great imperialism seated there. Rome was pre-eminent among the nations and was the place of dominion, and we know that there was great pride in being a Roman citizen. The chief captain said to Paul, "*With a great sum obtained I this citizenship*" ("*this freedom*" A.V.): Paul replied, "*But I am a Roman born*" ("*I was free born*" A.V.). And that made the man who had paid a great price for his citizenship recognize the superiority of this man before him.

If you look into these letters written from Rome, you see all those features related to the Church. Its universality: its absolute supremacy in the counsels of God: dominion centred in it for the ages to come; all this is in his letter to the Ephesians. And is there not a touch of that pride of citizenship in those words of his to the Philipppians - "*Our citizenship is in heaven; whence also we wait for a Saviour*" (*Phil. 3:20*)? Yes, Rome has made its impression upon him, but in every connection (such as with his jailor, the soldier-keeper and his armour) he is changing it all into spiritual values.

What is the end in view? It is not just to journey to see this temporal Rome. The end which looms up out of that visit is the great calling and destiny of the Church in union with Christ who in all things has the pre-eminence. That is the sum of the letters to the Ephesians, Colossians and Philipppians - the pre-eminence of Christ, and the Church united with Him therein. That is the end of the journey, that is what is in view beyond.

The Objective Divinely Conceived

Then look at the way to the end. Paul's reaching Rome was the outcome of numerous details of different kinds. We will try to focus them, to gather them up. To begin with, there was that in Paul's heart which was not just a natural and earthly desire, but proved to be of God, the will of the Lord. There were many things in Paul's interpretation of his desire which proved to be different from the Lord's thought, but the desire itself was all right - this longing to see the saints in Rome, and to get into Rome for spiritual ends. Desires are put into our hearts by the Lord. We misinterpret them and

think of them in our own way, and the Lord has to sift things out for us and adjust us, but in the end the desires often prove to be all right. The Lord has His way of realising, but the desire is there.

This began, then, with a desire in the heart of a man who was wholly for the Lord. Remember that. In all that we shall see, it is important to remember that this applies to a man who is utter for God. There was the longing, the purpose, and the expectation.

Mistaken Human Attempts to Reach the Objective

Then came the differences. There was the crisis of the long-drawn-out trial in Jerusalem, that crisis when Paul, knowing that there was a dead-set made against his life, suddenly said, "I appeal unto Caesar". That was the crisis. Now, was Paul precipitate, was he impulsive? Agrippa later said of him, "*This man might have been set at liberty, if he had not appealed unto Caesar*" (Acts 26:32). We may say, What a pity Paul made that appeal! Was he impulsive? - or was he artful? Did he see that even if he were released then, there were those lying in wait for his life? More than forty men had bound themselves under a curse, saying that they would neither eat nor drink till they had killed him. (Acts 23:12). But Paul perhaps saw that his quickest way to Rome was to appeal to Caesar, and that he would make the Roman empire to pay his fare! I do not know, it may be. But whether he made a mistake or not, whether he was precipitate or impulsive or - may I use the word again? - artful, what I do know is that this whole matter was in the hands of the Lord. We may make mistakes, we may be caught on an impulse, we may be precipitate, but provided our hearts are utterly for God, as utterly for God as was Paul's, the Lord can look after our mistakes and overrule our blunders.

Well, there were differences, you see, in the way in which Paul went to Rome from that in which he expected to go. He had made his plans, he had arranged his course; he was going to Jerusalem to minister to the saints that which had been entrusted to him, and then he was going to take his farewell of them and go off on the journey to Rome. His expectation was all very nice - but how differently everything turned out!

Divine Sovereignty Ruling and Overruling

Now the point is this: the Church does not proceed, even toward Divinely-fixed and appointed ends, by a protected course. Even with the Lord's end in view, we do not go by a way that is completely immune either from our weaknesses or from difficulties and adversities, and things which seem to upset completely all our plans. Our whole course will always be that of Divine overruling: not only ruling as in the unseen, but overruling in the seen. You must ever remember that those two things go hand in hand. God is ruling in the unseen: He is overruling in the seen. In the course there will always be plenty of room for an argument as to misadventure, calamity, defeat, tragedy, giving rise to regret, doubt and even condemnation. If we are so disposed, we can say, 'Oh, this is a calamity, this is defeat! This is due to my mistake, and everything is wrecked!' Had Paul been of another kind, like some of us, he would have said, 'I wish I had not appealed to Caesar! See what trouble I have got myself into! I am going to the bottom of the sea, and all my work is finished!' There is always room for that if we are so disposed, and thus to get under condemnation because we have made mistakes. The Lord has never so acted with His people that there was no room for anything like that. If we want to doubt, we shall have plenty of occasion for doubting. If we want to speak of tragedy, we shall have plenty of tragic experience. If we are disposed to get under condemnation, there will be plenty to take on. The way to the end is not a way free from these elements or from the possibility of so interpreting things. It will be that, in all and through all, God overrules, and at last we shall be able to exclaim, "and so we came to Rome"; the end reached through so much.

God's Objective not Frustrated by Human Frailty

You need to read the whole story again, and note every detail in the light of what I am saying. What a voyage, what a journey! How everything was threatened with complete destruction and loss! But the end was reached; and Paul, Aristarchus and Luke, representing the Church, were all there at the end. They were not disintegrated in any way, and the Church, as in them, was fully vindicated. They had made declarations, they had given warnings, they had given promises and assurances, and they had given commands. What they had said was at first flouted, ridiculed, set aside. Later, under duress, they were taken note of, and in the end perfectly vindicated. And have no doubt about it, the Church is going to be vindicated at length. Its testimony is going to be established and proved sure. Its word is going to be justified, its authority is going to be recognized. The testimony was fulfilled and the ministry enlarged to the whole scope of the universe from what looked like a narrowing down through straitening chains and imprisonment. The whole range of the eternities, of the heavenlies, and of the nations, was touched by the ministry from that imprisonment in Rome. Vindicated, established, enlarged: that will be the end of the way for those who are one with Him who is in the Throne, even though the way so often offers ground for real arguments about tragedy and disaster and for real questionings and fear because of mistakes.

The Break-up of all that is of Man

But on the way to that enlargement and vindication, while on the one side there seemed to be so much that was working in opposition and reverse and contradiction, on the other side it was a case of the stripping off of all the works of men. The ship did go to pieces, the man-made thing employed by the sovereignty of God to reach His ends was thrown away when His ends were in the way of realisation. There are a lot of things made by men, and godly men at that, which the Lord makes use of, but they will go, e.g. places of meeting, institutions, societies, organisations: they are made by men, they are useful, they help toward God's end, but like the ship, they are but means to the end. You must not put all your faith in the ship; you must not ascribe final values to the place, the means, the instrument. We shall find that the Lord has not committed Himself to keep the means intact, to hold the instrument for eternity. It is His Church that He is after, which He is preserving, which is to come out alive; and on the way, the *things* will have to go, they will have to be broken up, they cannot meet the full impact of the forces of evil in this terrific storm. The forces of evil are too much for anything made by man, but they are not the equal of what God has made: His Church will come out all right. Be careful that you do not put too much upon God's means, God's instrument, the ship. Keep your eye on God's real object. The framework of things may break up, but God's spiritual values will be eternally preserved. And let us not worry too much if God sees the time has come for the stripping off of things. They may have served a very good purpose and our hearts may be very much linked with them, with that place or that instrumentality; but if the Lord begins to break it up and take it from us, do not think everything of value is going. No, it is the spiritual values upon which our hearts must be set.

God's Objective Certain of Ultimate Attainment

The Lord is eventually triumphant, as we see outstandingly in this account - and triumphant in His Church. *"And so we came to Rome"*. What a "so" it was, and what a "so" it is! How much is packed into that little word "so"! It was something given into the heart by the Lord, something around which all kinds of expectations and imaginations were woven, all of which were entirely disappointed, undone, brought to disintegration and changed; but the purpose of God stood. That which God had put into the heart went through and was found at last to be not of man but of God. I wonder what Paul felt like as he entered Rome; remembering when long ago the thing came into his heart, and all

his visions and expectations and hope, and all his thoughts of going beyond Rome to Spain - and now this is how things have worked out! And so it is with us: not as we thought, not as we expected and planned, but we are here! That is the thing that matters; we are here!

We can transfer that to the large issue of the course of the child of God as well as of the Church. How many times have we looked at the storm, looked at situations, looked at our own faults and mistakes, at what the enemy has called our blunders, and have said, 'Oh, it is hopeless, we shall never get there!' And yet despite all that has happened, we are still going on, even though we cannot yet say that we have arrived. It will be like that if our hearts are as knit to the Lord and His eternal purpose as was that of this dear man Paul. When we get to heaven, we shall say, 'And so we came to heaven! Here we are!' We shall look at one another and say, 'Well, brother, you did not think you were going to be here, but here you are!' Believe me, that is God's sovereign part; and if any responsibility on our part comes in at all, it is that we should be of the spirit of this man who said, "*One thing I do*" (Phil. 3:13) - not, 'I hope to do', or, 'I am going to do when my present phase of life is passed, when my college years are finished'; not 'tomorrow', not 'presently', not 'when I am trained'. No, "*One thing I do*"; I am doing it now. If we are like that, we can count on this sovereignty of God, which may upset our plans and change our expectations; but we shall be there, and heaven will triumph in getting us there.