

Walking With Confidence as God Works
Pastor Larry Kroon
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One of the astounding things of the way our God works is the way He will take various circumstances, situations, and all the various pieces that may be involved in a situation, and He'll put 'em together in such a way to accomplish His purposes with a distinctive excellence; something that you look at and you wonder 'How is that going to come together? How is that gonna get accomplished?' and suddenly it begins to mesh, and you realize that God has had His hand in it, and His great purpose of makin' the reality, and the glory, and the wonder, and the mystery of Jesus known—that that great purpose is bein' accomplished in circumstances and situations where you saw no way it could be done. Our God has a way, an astounding way, of working His plan in circumstances and situations that are beyond us.

It's also confusing, though, if you're one of the pieces in that plan. He may be working it together, but you don't know how it all fits together. And yet you're having to make decisions, and you're having to take steps of action, or you're having to react emotionally. And you don't see the pattern; you don't see the results. In fact, some of the things you're doing right now you won't see the results, the impact, and how it fits, for two...four...six...ten years from now. And that's confusing. God's working and He's putting together this astounding plan with you, and through you, to make Jesus known, and yet you're in the middle of it and you can't...you don't know what's goin' on.

Over the next two weeks we wanna deal with that a little bit. I wanna use one of my favorite stories in the New Testament, of a situation where God put together His plan in an excellent way, but you don't see it until the end. And I wanna look at that story; it's one of my favorite stories. We'll be looking at it today. And then I wanna come back and I wanna look at it again and say ok, if you're one of the pieces in that story, if you're one of the participants in that and you're havin' to make decisions and yet you can't see how God's putting it all together, what do you do? How do you walk with confidence as God works things together in a way you can't imagine? That's where we're headed for the next two weeks.

We're gonna pick up the story in the city of Ephesus, a powerful, strategic city in what is now called Turkey. It was Asia Minor, sometimes called Asia at that time. The Apostle Paul is there; he's been there about two years. Christianity had not been there before, 'til he arrived. And he spent two years introducing Jesus to that community. And then it began to spread out from there, the Christian gospel began to spread out from there, and it began to cover the whole region. And Paul had been there for about two years. This is about twenty-five years...twenty-five years after the gospel had first been preached in Jerusalem, when Jesus had been raised from the grave, and Peter preached the first sermon in Jerusalem, and the church was born. And the church began to be a witness of the reality of this One who was crucified, is raised from the dead, He's the Messiah, He's the Christ, He's the ruler God has appointed over all, and He will return. That message, that good news, had started in Jerusalem twenty-five years before we're gonna pick up the story. It had moved north up into Antioch, and there the Apostle Paul had been very involved in communicating the gospel in that community, a city that was a crossroads city. And from there it began to spread very rapidly to other places. And Paul himself took it up further north into Asia Minor, to an area called Pisidin Antioch, a city that was a center of the interior of Asia Minor. And he presented the gospel up there. It began to spread in the hill country up in Asia Minor. And then he went on even further northwest to a city called Troas. And by then he had covered the whole northern area of Asia Minor, and the gospel was known throughout that area. He crossed the Aegean Sea at that point, and he began to take the gospel down what we now call Greece. It is...back then it was called Macedonia and Achaia. And he started with Philippi and moved to the intellectual hub of the Roman world, Athens. And then he eventually got down to Corinth, a major city where he planted a church there also.

So by this time, when we come to the story, it's twenty-five years after the gospel had started in Jerusalem. The Apostle Paul is in Ephesus; he's gone in there and he's spread the gospel through that Asia area. And we've basically got the whole eastern area of the Mediterranean is now saturated with the gospel. In fact, Paul says, 'I've covered it all down here.' So the next step, the next logical place for Paul now that he's in Ephesus and he's got this driving desire that God has put in him to keep tellin' people about Jesus...the next step to go, the next place that makes sense, as a person who was continually moving to the strategic locations, was to move to the most strategic of all locations. And that was to move further west and to go to Rome, the center of power in the Roman world...to go there and to speak of Jesus.

There were Christians there. There was a small Christian community; it was kind of decentralized. It wasn't well organized. It wasn't well founded in terms of a strong doctrinal base. But it was there. And Paul's desire at this point...he's finished in Ephesus, he's finished in that region, and he's got this God-given desire to get to Rome and tell them about Jesus, and use that and establish a church there, and use that as a base of operations for taking the gospel even further to the west into Spain. So that's on his heart; that's on his mind. In fact, we're told in Acts chapter 19 that

Paul purposed in the spirit to go to Jerusalem after he had passed through Macedonia and Achaia (Greece), saying, "After I have been there, I must also see Rome."

That's his target, is Rome. He said, "*I must also see Rome.*" Now, he doesn't mean 'It's on my life list of tourist stops, and I just gotta go see it.' There's a drive here. He's sayin', '*I must*, it is necessary, it's essential that I get there.' Interesting thing, though...even as he's sayin' that, even as he's sayin', 'I need to get to Rome; that's the next step for me,' he's bein' told by the Spirit of God to go to Jerusalem. The Spirit of God is tellin' him 'Go to Jerusalem.' Now, that doesn't fit with the destination he has in mind. For one, it's the opposite direction. It's as if somebody is in Anchorage, Alaska, and feels the necessity and the need and it's important for God's work to get to Nome, and God says, 'Yes, ok, but I want you to first go to Juneau.' Comparable distances here, only we don't have airplanes and cars; we're talkin' major journey detour. 'I need to get to Rome,' but the Spirit tells him to go to Jerusalem...opposite direction.

Not only an opposite direction, but there was no essential, compelling reason to go there. He was gonna bring an offering, some help for the Christians there, but he already had a team together that had been set up to take that offering and it wasn't essential that Paul went along. In fact, he had even said that it wasn't necessary that he go along to bring those funds back to Jerusalem. And not only that, it was dangerous for Paul to go there. By this time Paul had been on the road enough, speaking about Jesus throughout this end of the Mediterranean Sea, that the Jews had decided that he was a marked man. In fact, they decided that the Apostle Paul was a traitor against the Jewish faith. In fact, he was worse than a traitor. It wasn't just that he had turned and begun to follow a 'false messiah'; they were convinced that he was calling Jews to follow this same messiah, leave their Jewish faith and tradition behind 'em, and join the Gentiles. And it was the worst of all possible sins they felt he could be doing. And they wanted to get rid of Paul. In fact, we know that in this time frame, both before and after, there were at least three assassination plots put together by the Jews to take Paul out. They wanted him gone. And yet, God is tellin' him, 'You go to Jerusalem, the very center of Judaism, the very place where the Council wants to put you to death. We need you in Rome, Paul, but go to Jerusalem.'

He sets out to do that. He does exactly what...we're told here he goes to Macedonia and Achaia, he travels through Greece, visits those churches, then he heads off and he moves towards Jerusalem. As he does, along the way he stops and there's a meeting with some other Christians along the way. And he tells 'em...he tells 'em, 'I'm compelled by the spirit; I'm going to Jerusalem.' And he goes on and he says, 'I don't know what's going to happen to me there. I have no idea what's gonna happen. In fact,' he goes on and says, 'everywhere I go the Holy Spirit warns me that it's gonna involve bonds and chains and prison.' In fact, he gets to the point by the time he's nearing Jerusalem, he's convinced this is it, he's gonna die. And he says, 'I'm prepared; I'm ready to die. I wanna go to Rome, but the Spirit told me to go to Jerusalem.'

When he gets there things are difficult. A riot breaks out, and Paul is at the center of it. He didn't start it, but he's the one the mob attacks. And they begin to beat him, they begin to rip him to shreds, and it takes a Roman cohort...I mean, a Roman commander...to come in and bring in his soldiers to break up the riot. They take Paul, they put him in chains, they put him into the garrison jail cell, and the Romans start to sort out 'What in the world is going on with this man that we've got a riot in the city and they're trying to tear him apart?'

So there's a riot, he's arrested, he's put under Roman guard, and then he goes through a series of what I call five 'hearings', is the best way to describe it. They're five opportunities that people stop to hear his story, that he's able to give a defense for who he is and what he's about. And throughout this time he keeps trying to make clear to 'em that he's not anti-Jew, he's not anti-Rome; he's just pro-Jesus. And he's getting' five opportunities to do that. One in front of the mob, one in front of the riot—the commander slows them down and he lets Paul try to explain himself, but that doesn't work. The next day they put him in front of the Jewish Council in Jerusalem, and he tries to explain himself there. And it doesn't work; in fact, it just keeps escalating. And forty men take a vow, they take a pledge that they will not eat any more food; they will not eat any food until they've killed the Apostle Paul. The Roman governor hears about that, or the Roman military presence commander hears about that, and he says 'We've gotta get Paul outta Jerusalem.'

And so they do. They move him to the center for the Roman government there in Palestine; they take him to Caesarea. And there they have him walking through three more hearings where he's able to defend himself. The Jews come from Jerusalem. They stand before the Roman governor, and they give these charges. They say, 'This is what this man is doing.' And I love this section; it's found in the book of Acts, chapter 24, where the lawyer for the Jews stands up and he says, 'We have found this man a real pest.' I just love that; it's my favorite description of the Apostle Paul. 'We have found this man a real pest.' Now, they gotta get more specific than that. That's not gonna hold weight in a Roman court. And so they go on, they get more specific. The next thing they raise is the fact...they say 'He stirs up dissention. Everywhere he goes, he gets people riled up.' The Roman Empire valued peace. In fact, they were brutal in maintaining peace. That's how they maintained their empire, was enforcing a peace; and so, one of the worst crimes in the Roman Empire was to be a person who fomented dissention and division. And so they bring this charge against Paul, and they say, 'Everywhere he goes he stirs up dissention; specifically among the Jews, but they're part of the Empire.' And then they go on and they say, 'You know what? He's a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes. In other words, he's leading this strange little religious group, and we don't think they're really legal. You can't call 'em a religion. They're some kinda offshoot that's probably not legal with the Roman authorities.'

And then they use a third, and this was a charge they were really gonna press in front of the Roman governor. They said, 'He tried to desecrate the temple.' Now, he hadn't; but they accused him of that. They said he came in and he brought a Gentile into the inner courts. And he hadn't done that. But they said, 'You know what? This man doesn't respect the Jewish temple. He desecrates it; he's horrible around it.' They wanted to press this charge because this was one thing where the Romans would let the Jews mete out whatever punishment they wanted. Issues of the temple...the Roman government would tend to turn it over to the Jews and say, 'Whatever you want to do with him, do it.' That was a critical case to prove. As they argue the case in front of the governor they're not able to prove it. In fact, they're not able to prove any of these issues. And they go through five different hearings. When they're done, in fact, the Roman governors say, 'We don't think Paul's done anything wrong. This is just a dispute between those who think Jesus died and those who believe he died and rose again.' But they decide that, 'We'll go ahead and send him back to Jerusalem and let them sort it out in a religious court.'

And at that point the Apostle Paul does something that he had the right to do as a Roman citizen. It was a rare privilege in Rome that if you were a citizen, and a percentage of the population with respect to Roman citizenship was minor compared to the general population, but if you had that rare privilege of being a Roman citizen, which Paul was—he was born to a Roman citizen—if you were a Roman citizen and you were under accusation, you could appeal to Caesar. You could say, 'I wanna be heard before the Caesar, the ruler, the king.' Imagine in our day, somebody says, 'I want my trial in front of the President.' Well, that's what this was kinda like, and it would be granted...if not Caesar himself, one of his most immediate assistants would hear your case. So Paul does that. He says, 'I have the right to appeal to Caesar, and I'm gonna appeal to Caesar. I'm not going back to Jerusalem for this case.' And it's granted to him. This whole process of the riot, the arrest, the hearings, and then finally the appeal to Caesar, took about two years. This whole time Paul is living as a prisoner; fairly loose restrictions, but he's still a prisoner. And they put him on a prison ship with a guard, and they send him now to Caesar. They send him to Rome.

It's a long journey, convoluted; there's a shipwreck involved. They spend a winter on an island. But they eventually get to Rome. And when you come to the very end of Acts, we pick it up at Acts chapter 28...we're covering a lot of ground today...when you come to Acts 28 you're gonna have this statement, verse 14. It says, "*And thus we...*" Luke is included here because he's traveling along with Paul. He says, "*And thus we came to Rome.*" 'We arrived, we got there.' And then he describes, in the verses that follow, what it was like for Paul once he got to Rome. And this is interesting, 'cause he goes on and he says, 'Once we got there...' verse 16, he says

Paul was allowed to stay by himself, with the soldier who was guarding him.

In other words, Paul was able to rent his own quarters; he was able to live there, allowed a great deal of freedom there...almost like bein' in house arrest, only there was Roman soldier with him all the time. And that's the way it was for two years. It goes on, describes it in this way. It says he stayed two full years...the very last two verses in the book of Acts says

And he stayed two full years in his own rented quarters and was welcoming all who came to him.

People could visit him from all different places. They could come and see him. He just had his Roman guard with him. And it goes on and says

He was preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ...

...he kept talkin' about Jesus. And then this last phrase...and he did so

...with all openness, unhindered.

For two full years the Apostle Paul, the most controversial religious figure of that day, is able to talk about Jesus freely, openly, and unhindered, in the very center of power—Rome—with a Roman bodyguard protecting him. It's astounding. It's astounding. Interesting thing is, and we'll find this out in a letter he wrote about that time...he wrote a letter to the church in Philippi...and in the opening of that letter he writes to them, and they were very concerned about Paul in Rome, and how it was so difficult they were sure that it was horrible for him. And they were even more concerned that it was gonna set aside the whole cause of the gospel. The great leader was in prison. And he writes to them this letter, and he's trying to reassure them. And he says, 'Listen,'

"My circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel..."

And he goes on even further and he says

"...so that my imprisonment in the cause of Christ has become well-known throughout the whole praetorian guard..."

And when he says that, what he's indicating is these soldiers that were put on assignment to guard him...they were the very bodyguards of Caesar himself. They would do 'Caesar duty', they would do other duty, and then yeah, they would do duty with the Apostle Paul. He had the elite guards of the Roman empire standing by him as he shared the gospel of Jesus Christ unhindered, with all openness. And not only the guards...we're told

"...and to everyone else."

Eventually he was able to speak in front of the royal court. He was able to give witness at the very center of power. So he's able to look back at this time, what he's been through, and he's able to say, 'This has all turned out for the greater progress of the gospel. I wanted to go to Rome. God sent me to Jerusalem, put me in a prison, and eventually I'm in Rome speaking the gospel freely, unhindered, to the elite of the elite.'

That's the way our God works. It's amazing. He takes these various pieces and He heads in a direction we wouldn't go, and then He accomplishes something we could have never put together on our own. Question is, how do you track with a God like that? When you're the piece that's bein' moved around? When you're the piece that you think you need to get to Rome, but he's talkin' about Jerusalem, and you don't...it looks dangerous, it doesn't look like it makes sense...how do you walk with a God like that? How do you live it out when you're a piece in the puzzle; you don't see how it all fits together yet.

Short answer today; we're gonna address it carefully next week. Short answer is this—it comes from a wisdom statement found in the book of Proverbs, the Old Testament, where the writer says this. He says, 'Listen,'

Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and don't lean on your own understanding.

You can think it through, you can put your plans together, you can put your best conceptual model together of how this should work, and go to get it done. But listen, don't lean on that; don't trust that; don't rely on that. What you trust with your heart is the Lord, and what He's gonna do. And he adds another statement to that, another phrase. He goes on,

In all your ways acknowledge Him...

Wherever you're goin', whatever your target is, whatever you're tryin' to accomplish, in everything acknowledge Him...

...and He will make your path straight.

He will clear the way for you. But acknowledge Him; and that simply means acknowledge God as God. Do not ignore Him! Acknowledge Him.

Now, it's one thing to say this; it's a whole 'nother thing to live it. Especially it's a challenge to not lean on our own understanding in a culture like ours that is so adept, and has so much knowledge, and so much technology, and is so sure that we can handle almost anything. We're problem-solvers, especially the United States. It's a challenge in our culture to say, 'You know what? My idea may not be the right thing. I need to trust God with my heart.'

It's another thing to pay attention to our God in a culture that is as distracted as ours, to hear Him in a culture that has so much noise. One of the things we've worked on all year with our application groups, small groups that are run for about six weeks...and they're very practice-oriented...and one of the things we keep practicing in these groups is recognizing and responding to the Holy Spirit in your life. And we practice certain spiritual disciplines; we coach people on it. And it's just been kind of a great process all year as we've run these groups. One of the things we do in these groups is we teach little spiritual disciplines that'll help you focus on what God may be tellin' you in your life right now. And one of the spiritual disciplines we teach one week is fasting. And we encourage people, you know, go without something this week. Say 'no' to something so you can pay better attention to God and what He's tryin' to tell you. And traditionally that has usually meant, and people usually first react that way, 'we'll go without food.' And we encourage 'em, yeah, go without food for a day. Or at least go without broccoli for ten hours (☺) or somethin' like that. Say 'no' to something. And then every time that you have a craving for that sprout of broccoli (is that what they call 'em, sprouts?) or candy, that candy bar, or that cup of coffee, and you want it, just stop and say, 'no, I'm gonna concentrate on what God has for me.' And people were doing that. But you know, the fasting...the form of fasting that had the greatest impact this winter in our small groups, and I saw it in my first group, and I saw it in every group I ran and it just struck me...the people that picked up most what God was trying to say to them in their lives right now were the people who turned off their radios for a day...the guys goin' to and from work and said, 'You know what? Today I'm not gonna listen to talk radio.' Or the people who turned off the newscast, or the people who turned off their cable TV for a day, or the people that shut down their internet for a day. It was astounding to me when our people shut off all that noise, how much more clearly they heard our God.

We're gonna come back to that next week. How do we follow a God who we know wants to get us to Rome, but He's takin' us to Jerusalem? How do we make decisions, take action, and adopt the right attitudes and practices? We're gonna talk about that next week when we look at Paul's life during this timeframe...because it is that important for us. I am absolutely convinced that God is working in and through each one of you, the various pieces and circumstances of your life, to make the reality of Jesus Christ known in you and through you. And right now, you cannot see how all those pieces potentially will fit together. You need to listen; you need to follow. Because He may take you to Jerusalem before you go to Rome.

Let's stand.

[Congregation sings the prayer song and is dismissed]