

CONVERSION STUDIES

CONVERSIONS IN ROME

Example thirteen of thirteen

When Paul came to the city of Rome, the church was already there. Its origin may date back to shortly after Pentecost when sojourners from Rome, who were in Jerusalem for Pentecost, returned to Rome to tell the good news of Christ and salvation. Paul mentions over two dozen Christians living in Rome with whom he had had an intimate connection (Romans, chapter 16).

In just three days after he arrived in Rome he called the Jewish leaders together. He explained why he was a prisoner, and before they left, they agreed to a date for a full hearing of the gospel. "And when they had appointed him a day, they came to him into his lodging in great number; to whom he expounded the matter, testifying the kingdom of God, and persuading them concerning Jesus, both from the law of Moses, and from the prophets, from morning till evening. And some believed the things which were spoken, and some disbelieved" (Acts 28:23,24). A man who was willing to suffer as Paul had suffered for what he believed deserves, and will usually get, a hearing.

The content of Paul's sermon that day was the kingdom of God, Jesus, and the law and the prophets. It was necessary to point out to the Jews the spiritual nature of the kingdom and how it differed from the concept of an earthly kingdom they held. Jesus had said, "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36). This was Paul's usual approach with the Jews. A detailed example is recorded in his sermon in Antioch of Pisidia (Acts 13:16,30-39). Luke does not tell us what Old Testament Scriptures he used in Rome, but it would be logical to think that he appealed to those used by him and others on previous occasions recorded in Acts.

This day in Rome must have been one of Paul's best days. He spent the day preaching and persuading Jews that Jesus was the Messiah promised in their Scriptures. The results of that full day of preaching follows the pattern shown elsewhere (Acts 28:24). The believers would give more thought to the gospel, but the unbelievers would be hardened. The Gentiles

will listen. "Be it known therefore unto you, that this salvation of God is sent unto the Gentiles: they will also hear" (Acts 28:28). The preaching of the gospel always makes a division between believers and unbelievers. Some hearers are receptive to the truth, and are persuaded. Given time, the open minded will obey the gospel. Others, who do not wish to accept the responsibilities that the gospel lays on people, find reasons to reject it. Before the disagreeing Jews left, Paul directed their attention to one more prophecy. He tells them their sin is the same as their ancestors. "Go, tell this people, Hear ye indeed, but understand not; and see ye indeed, but perceive not. Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and turn again, and be healed" (Isaiah 6:9,10). They are shutting their eyes, plugging their ears, and refusing to understand with their hearts.

Paul wants them to know why his message is not understood by their hearts. It was not because the message was complicated or hard to understand. One's heart (his mind, emotions, and will) is reached by the eyes and ears. When the eyes and ears are closed, the channels are blocked by which the word can reach the heart and change the will. The reason the gospel is or is not received and obeyed is determined by the will of the hearer. Paul wants the unbelieving Jews to know that God has also sent salvation to the Gentiles, and he will turn to them (Acts 28:28). He knew by experience that the Gentiles will hear and obey the gospel.

We can see the providence of God at work in the life of Paul during his two years as a prisoner. "And he abode two whole years in his own hired dwelling, and received all that went in unto him, preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching the things concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness, none forbidding him" (Acts 28:30,31). God had promised that he would

bear witness for Christ in Rome (Acts 23:11). Though he came as a prisoner, his prison became a place to preach Christ. He was permitted to receive and teach all who came to him. Who brought them? Other Christians. God opened the door and kept it open. That door led to converts from the slaves of Rome to the household of Caesar. Converts were also made later in Nero's household (Phil. 4:22). From letters written by Paul during his imprisonment we learn that several men were with him at least part of the time. Financial assistance was sent to him from the brethren in Philippi. The preachers and Christians in Rome were motivated by Paul's authority and example to spread the gospel

over the city of Rome while Paul proclaimed the word in his own house. We are not told how many were converted, but the circumstances were ripe for the progress of the gospel. Luke ends the book stating that Paul preached with boldness and with no hindrance. Thus ends this sketch of the world's best known worker.

From Paul's two years of imprisonment in Rome we can learn one of life's most needed lessons. If you can't do what you would like, do what you can where you are, and God will bless your efforts. He blessed Paul in Rome, and will bless you wherever you are.

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