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**The Acts of the Apostles**  
**XXV. Cancelled: A Trip to Spain**  
**Acts 21:1-17, Romans 15:22-33**

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Having spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ throughout so much of the Mediterranean world, Paul now has a new plan. Actually, the way he speaks of it, it seems less a plan, and more a deep desire – something he is longing with all his heart to do. To visit the church in Rome, first of all – the great capital city of the Empire. And then, having visited with the saints in Rome, to push on from there to what was then the westernmost limits of the known world. To carry the Gospel into lands that had not yet heard of Jesus. Paul desires to go to Spain. He writes to the Romans:

*But now, since I no longer have any room for work in these regions, and since I have longed for many years to come to you, I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain . . .*

So excited is Paul about this journey to Rome and then on to Spain that he mentions it a second time a few verses later: *“I will leave for Spain by way of you.”*

But before heading for Rome and then to Spain – Paul’s heartfelt desire – he first is planning to go to Jerusalem, to check in with the saints there and to deliver a collection for those in need in Jerusalem. *“At present,”* he writes to the Romans, *“I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints.”* Our reading from Acts records that Paul indeed made it to Jerusalem with the collection. But that there, in Jerusalem, it had all begun to go wrong. There in Jerusalem Paul comes up against a hostile Jewish leadership determined to destroy him at all costs. Even before Paul reached Jerusalem, while still in Caesarea, a prophet named Agabus had foretold that Paul, in Jerusalem, would be bound up in chains and delivered to the Romans for trial and punishment. But Paul had not been dissuaded by that warning. And, indeed, that prophecy is precisely what happened. The rest of the book of Acts contains the events of Paul’s many trials and travails. But the upshot is this: none of what Paul was desiring to do, had planned to do, came to pass. He did make it to Rome, that is true – but only in chains. And as for his dream of taking the Gospel to Spain – to the very ends of the earth, as Jesus had put it – well, that never happened at all.

So write “cancelled” across Paul’s dream of reaching Spain with the Gospel. Life happened, bad things happened – and Paul never got there. And sometimes life does that to us also. Writes “cancelled” across some dream, some desire, some plan we have cherished. And sometimes life writes “cancelled” not only upon our dreams for the future, but upon our present happiness. We find ourselves in a place we never expected to be, in a situation we would never have chosen for ourselves, stumbling along a path we had not foreseen. A job is lost, a venture

fails. A marriage falters, a child loses his or her way. An accident, an unexpected illness – a doctor speaking to us that dreaded word “cancer.” And a thousand variations more upon that them. Cancelled, our trip to Spain.

Or maybe even it is death, the ultimate cancellation of our plans and dreams and desires. Death taking away from us someone we had thought we could never live without. But whatever it may be, whatever it is that happens, we all know what it is when all of a sudden what we thought our life was going to be, where we thought it was going, that future we had long both desired and assumed would be ours is shaken, upended. Cancelled, like a trip to Spain.

What makes it even harder then are the questions, the fears, the doubts. Wondering where God is in the midst of everything going to pieces. Wondering why God has allowed life to do this to us. Paul had written to the Romans, *“I know that when I come to you I will come in the fulness of the blessing of Christ.”* And a little further along, *“So that by God’s will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company.”* But where was all of that now – Paul in prison in Rome, his trip to Spain cancelled – if not his very life? How did Paul take it when his plans fell through and his dream died? How did he, who so passionately loved Christ, take it when suddenly it must have seemed as if Christ had abandoned him? Did he lash out as God, as we are certainly tempted to do? Did he turn his back on God, as many before us have done? Did he rail against the unfairness of it all, given all that he had done for Christ?

Well, no, he did not. And we know this because of a letter Paul wrote to the church in Philippi – a letter he wrote from his prison cell in Rome. A letter he wrote from out of the midst of his cancelled trip to Spain. In that letter to the Philippians, we are privileged to see just exactly how Paul responded to his imprisonment, to his cancelled trip to Spain. And from that letter he wrote to the Philippians, we are given to see a better way for us to respond in the midst of our own heartbreaks and disasters and cancellations.

For the first thing that letter to the Philippians reveals to us about Paul’s response to his cancelled trip to Spain is that Paul discovered that even in the midst of everything going wrong, even in the midst of that dark cell and those heavy chains, Jesus Christ was still very close to him. Perhaps even nearer to him than ever before. Maybe it took a while for him to know that – the way it sometimes is very hard for us, at first, to perceive Christ in the midst of trouble. But truly Paul discovered that while life had dealt him a cruel blow, Jesus Christ was there with him in the midst of it all. He writes to the Philippians, in a spirit which defies all ordinary human expectation, *“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.”*<sup>1</sup> Now, understand, Paul is not being some sort of super-spiritual, Pollyanna, make-believe Christian here – pretending that everything is just fine and dandy when truly it is not. When he says, *“Rejoice in the Lord,”* he is not saying, *“Golly gee, everything is just so great here in prison. And I’m just so glad that all these terrible things have happened to me – yippee! Rejoice!”* No, not at all. This rejoicing is made of sterner stuff, truer stuff, tried and tested stuff. Rejoice in the Lord, says Paul, for one and only one reason: *“The Lord is at hand.”*<sup>2</sup> Paul has found that life’s disasters and disillusionments do not sever us from the Lord’s care, the Lord’s presence. But rather that they open the door for us to receive the Lord’s care, to know the Lord’s presence, much more intimately and powerfully as we turn to Him in our helplessness – a closeness to Christ that we might never have known when life was going according to plan:

*The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*<sup>3</sup>

When our trips to Spain are cancelled, we are tempted to believe that it is all God's fault – which it never is. At the very least, we are tempted to believe that He has abandoned us – which He never does. What Paul writes from his prison cell is a hard-won insight into the ways of God: that God does not bring evil upon His children, nor does He remove Himself from them when they need Him most. Rather, when our trips to Spain are cancelled, what we shall find, what we can know by faith if not by sight, is that the Lord really is close at hand. Perhaps closer even than He was before.

And we can, therefore, pour out our pleas and protests and pain upon the One who is not only close at hand, but listening to our every word and groan with an extraordinarily compassionate ear. And answering us, from out of somewhere deep within us – answering us, in time, with the gift of a peace surpassing anything which seems possible to us at first, given our circumstances. The peace which comes only from learning that, whatever we are going through, Jesus really is with us in it all, through it all – *“The Lord is at hand.”*

And not only so, Paul writes from his prison cell in Rome to the Philippians, but the God who is close at hand when our trips to Spain are cancelled will also give to us, not only His peace, but everything else that we need to endure, to survive, to cope, to make it through the pain:

*I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger abundance and need: I can do all things through him who strengthens me.*<sup>4</sup>

*“I can do all things through him who strengthens me.”* I can endure all things. I can overcome all things. I can do all things through him who strengthens me. That too is what Paul has learned in the face of his cancelled trip to Spain. He has learned that Christ will give us all that we need to survive, to make it through, to face what has to be faced and to handle whatever comes next. He has learned the deep secret of faith, which is learned, and can only be learned, in difficult times: *“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”* I can deal with even this, with the help of my Savior.

A good while back I came across a testimony in Christianity Today magazine by a Harvard Law School professor named William Stuntz. Several years before the article, Stuntz had badly hurt his back – and was forced to live with constant pain after all the surgeries and treatments had failed to heal him. And then, a few years later, shortly after taking up his position at Harvard, one of his children suffered a life-threatening illness. In the aftermath of that struggle, his marriage fell apart. And then, just a year or so before he wrote his testimonial, he had been diagnosed with

cancer and, after surgeries and rounds of chemotherapy, had been told he had at best a few years to live. He was fifty years old at the time. And yet his testimony is not about his suffering, not a complaint about the cancellation of his own trip to Spain, but instead about how he has found in Jesus the strength to endure all of this. And not just to endure, but to find new meaning and new resiliency and even new joy through it all.

In the article, he says he has learned three things through his suffering. First, that while God doesn't always remove our struggles from us, He does always redeem them for good. He writes, *"The loss may remain, but good will come from it, and the good will be larger than the suffering it redeems. Our pain is not empty; we do not suffer in vain. When life strikes hard blows, what we do has value. Our God sees it."*

And the second thing he has learned is how being with Jesus in the struggle changes the nature of the struggle itself. When suffering is shared with Jesus, who Himself suffered, the suffering itself can become a source of profound insight and meaning: *"God the Son does more than save sinners. Jesus' life and death also change the character of suffering, give it dignity and weight and even, sometimes, a measure of beauty. Cancer and chronic pain remain ugly things, but the enterprise of living with them is not an ugly thing. God's Son so decreed it when he gave himself up to torture and to death."*

And then the third lesson he has learned from that promise of resiliency in the midst of his cancelled trip to Spain: that God does not forget us in the midst of our suffering. But rather He always comes to us, enfolds us, holds us close until the suffering is past: *"At the center . . . stands a God who does vastly more than remember his image in us. He pursues us as lovers pursue one another. It sounds too good to be true, and yet it is true. So I have found, in the midst of pain and heartache and cancer."<sup>5</sup> In other words, what he has learned is precisely what Paul learned from his jail cell in Rome, trip to Spain cancelled: *"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."**

And then the last thing Paul learns, and writes to the Philippians from his prison cell in Rome, is that God will in time open up for us new plans, new dreams, new possibilities for life going forward. That a cancelled trip to Spain is never a dead end from which there is no recovery – but, finally, only a detour to a different end and a different journey. For Paul, this took the form of finding a missionary opportunity even greater than if he had made it to Spain: from his prison cell in Rome, he was able to witness about Christ to the very imperial guard of Caesar's own household:

*I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.*

Paul may never get to Spain, Paul may be in chains in Rome, but his story is not over. In fact, a new and fruitful and exciting chapter is just beginning. The Lord who is with him in that prison

cell in Rome, the Lord who strengthens him in the wake of his cancelled trip to Spain, is also the Lord who leads him into a new possibility, a new plan, a new opportunity for life and for service. And so the Lord will do also for us.

The beloved Christian teacher and writer, Lewis Smedes, went to visit an old friend named Cal who was dying in a hospital bed in Los Angeles. Smedes describes how they spent four days together in that hospital room, talking about their past together, as well as Cal's future – talking the way only two deeply good friends who have known each other a long, long time can talk. And then it was time to say goodbye. Smedes writes:

*I walked away from Cal's hospital bed, opened the door, and stopped for a moment to look back before I left him. He lifted his head a bit, smiled, and said, "It's all right." And then I left him and never saw him again. But his words have haunted me ever since and have become for me a metaphor of life's deepest question. How can anyone really believe that it is all right when everything is hopelessly wrong?<sup>6</sup>*

The answer, writes Smedes, is grace. The grace of God revealed to us in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The grace of God that can take even a crucifixion and turn it into a glorious resurrection. The grace of God that reassures us that though our trip to Spain may be cancelled, a new journey awaits. Smedes concludes:

*Grace does not cure all our cancers, transform all our kids into winners, or send us all soaring into the high skies of . . . success. Grace is rather an amazing power to look earthy reality full in the face, see its sad and tragic edges, feel its cruel cuts, join in the primeval chorus against its outrageous unfairness, and yet feel in your deepest being that it is good and right for you to be alive on God's good earth. Grace is power, I say, to see life very clearly, admit it is sometimes all wrong, and still know that somehow, in the center of your life, "It's all right." This is one reason we call it amazing grace.<sup>7</sup>*

And Paul ends his letter to the Philippians with just that thought, just that prayer, just that hope for them in the midst of whatever life may bring upon them. He closes out his letter from his prison cell in Rome, trip to Spain cancelled, with these words – which do, indeed, make everything all right even when everything is wrong: *"The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit."*<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Philippians 4:4.

<sup>2</sup> Philippians 4:5.

<sup>3</sup> Philippians 4:5-7.

<sup>4</sup> Philippians 4:11-13.

<sup>5</sup> This and the above, William J. Stuntz, "Three Gifts for Hard Times," *Christianity Today*, Vol. 53, No. 8 (August, 2009), pp. 44-47.

<sup>6</sup> Lewis Smedes, *How Can It Be All Right When Everything Is Wrong?* (Shaw, 2000), p. 13.

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<sup>7</sup> Smedes, p. 16.

<sup>8</sup> Philippians 4:23.