

“I MUST ALSO SEE ROME”

Acts 19:21–20:12

Key Verse: 19:21

“Now after these events Paul resolved in the Spirit to pass through Macedonia and Achaia and go to Jerusalem, saying, ‘After I have been there, I must also see Rome.’”

Do you have a vision for your life? Not something somebody told you, but a vision that came to you personally? Some would say, “What’s *that*?” or, “That’s *scary*.” A vision might be a hallucination, or a sign of a mental breakdown. Who wants to dedicate life to a vision that’s a fantasy? Isn’t it better to be “down to earth,” laid back, practical? Some think living with vision is a way of coping with trauma. But vision is much bigger than us or our problems. Where does vision come from? Real vision comes from God. The Bible says God has great vision for all those he calls to believe in Jesus (1 Pet. 2:9). Sometimes he gives a unique vision to a certain believer. This happens to Paul. God gives him the vision to go to Rome. What does his vision mean? How does he live with it? What does it mean to us as Christians? May God speak to us through his word.

In our study of Acts we’ve been seeing its main theme: God wants all of us to live as Spirit-filled witnesses of Jesus. To show what this looks like, Acts describes two main witnesses, Peter and Paul. There are so many things to learn in Acts, but the main point now is to learn from Paul the witness of Jesus. So far, we’ve gone over all three of his missionary journeys. On each one, something major has happened (map 1). On the first journey God used Paul to launch gospel ministry into Cyprus and Galatia. On the second, God used him to bring the gospel to Europe, starting in Macedonia and Greece. On the third, God reached the entire region of Asia Minor, through his two years in one place.

Read 19:21. This verse is like a road map for the rest of Paul’s travels in Acts (chpts. 20–28). Paul senses his ministry in Ephesus is coming to a close. He resolves “in the Spirit” and says, “I must also see Rome.” How does he reach this conclusion? Paul’s friends Priscilla and Aquila, who’ve lived with him for the past several years in both Corinth and Ephesus, used to live in Rome (18:1–2). They surely told him about the Christian community there. Others Paul knew also

traveled to Rome for various reasons. But going to Rome is not just his human desire to see a famous city. The Holy Spirit gives Paul this conviction and decision. Throughout Acts, the Holy Spirit is the One who's been sending out witnesses. The Holy Spirit sends Philip and Peter to people from different races.¹ The Holy Spirit sends Barnabas and Paul out from Antioch (13:2). The Holy Spirit calls Paul to Europe through a vision of a man of Macedonia (16:6–10). Now, the Holy Spirit shows Paul that God wants him to go to Rome.

But why Rome? Paul has just experienced God's blessing on his ministry in Ephesus, which reached all of Asia (19:10). The Spirit shows him the same thing can happen in Rome on an even greater scale. Paul knows it's not going to happen right away. Look at verse 21 again. He senses the Holy Spirit wants him first to pass through Macedonia and Achaia. Why does he have to go there first? He's been communicating with churches in Macedonia, and through his prayers he realizes God wants him to visit them. The church in Corinth also really needs his help right now. And why does he have to go to Jerusalem after that? It's because he cares about the whole Christian movement. He knows the Christians in Jerusalem are wondering if the new Gentile Christians on the mission field are genuine. Paul has been trying to build unity between Jewish and Gentile Christians by going to Jerusalem four times already. Going there again is not just his idea; he's being "constrained by the Spirit" to go to Jerusalem (20:22). And he concludes, "After I have been there, I must also see Rome." Why Rome? God has given Paul vision to reach all those who never heard of Jesus. He wrote in his Letter to the Romans, "...and thus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else's foundation, but as it is written, 'Those who have never been told of him will see, and those who have never heard will understand'" (Rom.15:20–21; cf. Isa.52:15). He believes that in Rome God will give him a spiritual harvest among Gentiles who've never heard (Rom.1:13). Paul has the hope and vision of God for the Gentile world through the power of the Holy Spirit (Rom.15:8–13).

So what does he do? Look at verse 22. Paul sends Timothy and Erastus to visit God's people in Macedonia while he himself stays in Ephesus. Why does he stay in Ephesus? Right about now, Paul writes his first letter to the Corinthians, where he explains: "But I will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost, for a wide door for effective work has opened for me, and there are many adversaries" (1 Cor.16:8–

¹ 8:29; 10:19–20.

9). God has given him the vision that his ultimate destination is Rome, but he's also sensitive to how the Holy Spirit is working each day. It tells us that living with God's vision doesn't cause us to just "abandon ship" where we're at.

Look at verse 22 again. Let's think about this word "helpers." In this context, Timothy and Erastus are not Paul's menial servants; the word can also be translated as "assistants." Paul sees them as his peers. We don't know much about Erastus, but we do know Timothy. Who is he? He's a youth with a bad stomach and frequent illnesses (1 Tim.4:12; 5:23). But on the second missionary journey Timothy traveled with Paul to each city and experienced the same persecutions. Paul left him in Berea with Silas while he went alone to Athens and Corinth.² Later when Timothy joined Paul in Corinth, Paul sent him back to Thessalonica (1 Thess.3:2). Now, in his first letter to the Corinthians Paul writes that Timothy is doing "the work of the Lord" (1 Cor.16:10). Timothy is a rare man, "genuinely concerned" for others' welfare (Phil.2:20). So Paul sends him for the third time to Macedonia. People there know him. In Paul's absence Timothy has become his right-hand man. Paul describes him as "God's minister in the gospel of Christ," able to exhort and establish people in gospel faith (1 Thess.3:2). Though he's so busy in ministry, God uses Paul to raise a young spiritual leader.

Then there's a riot in Ephesus (23–41). First we see what causes it (23–27). It's a materialistic silversmith named Demetrius. He sees that Paul's ministry is getting so many people to repent, it's damaging his own idol-making business. He uses incendiary language to get his colleagues to stir up the riot. It's really sad that for some people's greed, many are deceived into thinking the goddess is real. It's like pop stars or sports stars today. Next, we see how God protects Paul through the disciples and some of his friends who are "Asiarchs," government leaders (23–34). Even with his great vision for the world, Paul has had time to make such friends. Another cause of the riot is racial pride. The Ephesians, in their pride, don't like outsiders influencing them. Finally, the city clerk calms down the crowd (35–41). His words show that it wasn't the Christians who started the riot, but Demetrius and the easily-rattled crowd. This event shows that when people receive the gospel and truly repent, persecution follows. The good news of Jesus shakes the idolatrous, materialistic, proud city of Ephesus to its core. And God, in his sovereign will, protects Paul, for now.

² 17:14; 18:5.

Look at 20:1. Though he just nearly got killed in Ephesus, before leaving Paul wants to encourage the disciples. Then, he departs for Macedonia, goes “through those regions” and also gives them “much encouragement” (1b–2). The word “encourage” is repeated here twice. Why do the Macedonian churches need such encouragement? We learn from another of Paul’s letters at this time that they’re going through “a severe test of affliction” and “extreme poverty” (2 Cor.8:2). To really encourage them, Paul is traveling on foot, covering hundreds of miles, spending time in each place. So this trip likely takes him several months. But to see Paul again in person brings great comfort to these suffering believers. He’s also helping them prepare an offering for the poor saints in Jerusalem.³ Most likely on this trip Paul takes the Roman road “Via Egnatia” in Macedonia all the way to Dyrrachium in Illyricum to share the gospel (map 2; cf. Rom.15:19). Paul then comes to “Greece” (2b). Verse 3a says, “There he spent three months...” It’s when he writes his letter to the Romans (Rom.15:25–26). Look at verse 3b. To avoid a plot by the Jews, instead of sailing for Syria, Paul goes to Macedonia again. But he’s not alone. Look at verse 4. Seven young men, the fruit of all three journeys, accompany him. Sopater from Berea, and Aristarchus and Secundus from Thessalonica, are from the second journey. Gaius of Derbe and Timothy of Lystra are from the first journey. Tychicus and Trophimus from Ephesus are from the third journey. They are from Macedonia, Galatia and Asia Minor (map 1). For the sake of safety and accountability each man is carrying offerings for Jerusalem from his home church (2 Cor.8:18–21, 23b). But this team is much more than that. While traveling, they are learning from Paul as he’s speaking and encouraging. They’re getting to know God’s people in Macedonia and witness God’s work in every place where Paul stops. They’re bonding as peers and being strengthened as new leaders. Why is Paul taking them to Jerusalem? They’re like letters of recommendation from Christ himself about Paul’s gospel ministry to Gentiles (2 Cor.3:2–3). Paul stays behind in Philippi for Passover to have fellowship with people, while he sends the journey team ahead to Troas, where he soon spends a week with them (5–6).

Finally, we see Paul’s ministry in Troas (7–12; map 1). Early on his second journey, in Troas Paul saw the vision of a man of Macedonia (16:8–11). Recently, he stopped by briefly and found Troas like an open door in the Lord but couldn’t stay because he was looking for Titus (2 Cor.2:12). Now on his third visit he stays to minister. Troas, a major port city, is a Roman colony of about 100,000

³ 1 Cor.16:1–4; 2 Cor.8:1–5.

people, with aqueducts, baths, and a large theater (image). Look at verse 7. The word “talked” is literally “dialogued,” also translated as “reasoned” to describe Paul’s ministry.⁴ Paul is again in dialogue with people, asking deep questions and listening to their answers. He’s so passionate to help them digest the gospel, he keeps engaging them until midnight. Then tragedy strikes. A youth named Eutychus gets so sleepy he falls out the third story window and dies. Paul goes down to him and with compassion raises him from the dead. It again shows Paul is a real apostle of Christ. And he goes right back upstairs to eat and continue speaking with people until dawn. It’s an all-night gospel ministry. Paul makes the most of the time to strengthen and bless both the people there and his journey team members. And the resurrection power of Jesus is with him.

Paul’s vision gives him great focus. The riot in Ephesus doesn’t distract him. The death in Troas doesn’t discourage him. The travel doesn’t intimidate him. He’s constantly encouraging, visiting, writing letters, mentoring young leaders, working on unity, engaging people in gospel conversations, and moving toward where God wants him to go: first to Macedonia and Achaia, then to Jerusalem, and finally, to Rome. Paul is driven by a Spirit-inspired vision to bring the good news of Jesus to the most people possible. We can learn from him how to live with God’s vision. It’s not an escape; it’s actually the vision most grounded in reality. With this vision Paul is first and foremost a pastor of people. He’s eager to build up and strengthen new believers in Christ. He’s ready to go through hardships to visit their communities one by one. All the while, he doesn’t lose sight of God’s bigger hope to reach the unreached people of the world.

Why is Paul so passionate about spreading the gospel? He’s deeply indebted to the grace of Jesus, which is for all people, and firmly believes in the power of the gospel (Rom.1:14–16). The message of forgiveness in the cross of Christ and the living hope of his resurrection are the answer for everyone: they’re so powerful, so life-changing! This gospel changed even Paul, the formerly self-righteous Pharisee, into a man of God’s grace. Jesus’ death and resurrection are still the only way to experience the life-changing grace of God. They still are the power of God that can change the most unlikely person. To live with God’s vision and be passionate about sharing the gospel, we all need to experience, and renew, the life-changing power of God’s grace in our lives. To have this vision we need to truly delight in knowing Jesus and in the wonder of his gospel.

⁴ 18:19; 19:8–9; cf. 17:2,17; 18:4; 24:25.

But how can we practically live with God's vision for the world? It's when the Holy Spirit comes upon us. At the beginning of Acts Peter quoted the prophet Joel: "And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams" (2:17). It's why Paul not only is inspired with gospel vision, but also prays "without ceasing" that by God's will he might go to Rome (Rom.1:9–10). For any of us to live with a gospel vision for the world, we need to be praying "without ceasing" for it. We also might ask ourselves, "What is my own personal 'Rome?'" For Paul, it was the most strategic place in his world where God could use him. For us, it usually has to do with where we live, work, and spend most of our time. Are we just living where and doing what we want? Are we prioritizing our own human desires, comfort, or ego? Are we really in the right place to engage in spreading the gospel? If not, we need to pray for, pay attention to, and submit to the Holy Spirit, who is trying to show us where we need to be. And wherever we are, we all need to be intentional and proactive in sharing our faith in Jesus. Pursuing God's vision is never easy. There surely will be challenges, rejection, misunderstanding, and hardships. So we need to keep praying, asking God for grace and strength.

So, do you have a vision for your life? Do you share the general gospel vision of God's grace reaching all the people of the world? Do you have a specific sense of God's vision for you? Let's read 19:21 again. May God help us see his great vision that the grace of Jesus is for every human being in the world. And wherever we are, let's pray to live as friend-makers, shepherds, encouragers, mentors, and uniters, willing to suffer anything for our Lord Jesus.