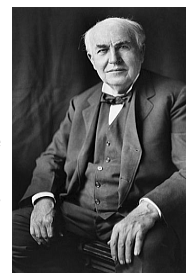


## I. Introduction

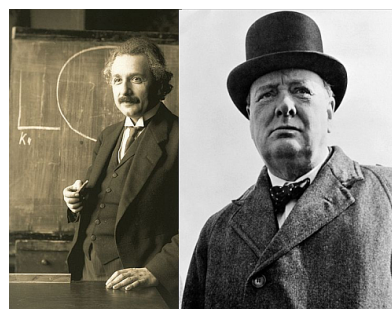
Good morning! Today I want to talk about opportunity. Everyone loves an opportunity and we regularly congratulate those who have good opportunities. When a young person is admitted to graduate school or gets a chance to travel overseas, or when a friend gets a promotion at work, we say, “*Congratulations, it is a great opportunity.*”



Sometimes we think of opportunity as the result of luck, but it is more than that. Thomas Edison, the famous inventor whose successes include the phonograph, the motion picture camera, and electric lighting, attributed his success to hard work. Concerning opportunity, he said, “*Opportunity is missed by most people because it is dressed in overalls and looks like work.*”



Albert Einstein noted that opportunities often arise out of problems, he said, “*In the midst of difficulty lies opportunity.*” Winston Churchill, the British statesman, expressed a similar feeling, saying, “*The pessimist sees difficulty in every opportunity. The optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty.*”



One message that is in all of these quotes is that opportunity does not come easily. It is not just luck or good fortune. It is a lot of hard work and it often comes in times of difficulty.

Now I would like to share two quotes that teach us something about our opportunities for Christian witness. These people are not famous, but their words are powerful. Sally Koch teaches us that, “*Great opportunities to help others seldom come, but small ones surround us every day.*” And, R. Falcon inspires us, saying, “*Each Day is a Brand New Opportunity to be Jesus to the World.*”

There is one and only one Savior: our Lord Jesus Christ. But when we believe in Jesus, He comes and lives in our hearts. So, as we love and serve others in the Name of Jesus, we are, in a sense, Christ to them. Christ lives within us and leads us by His Holy Spirit. And so, in every circumstance, we can find opportunities to be witnesses for Jesus in the things we say and do.

I think Paul had something like this in mind when he wrote **Galatians 2:20**, “**I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.**” Christ lives in us. Amen? Amen!

This message is our 65<sup>th</sup> in Acts and we will reach the end today. But, next week we will have one more Acts message to wrap things up. At the end of last week’s message, Paul had finally reached Rome. He was still a prisoner because he was waiting for his appeal to Caesar to be heard, but he was allowed to live in his own rented house with just one guard. Let’s read Acts 28:17-31 and see what opportunities Paul finds in his situation.



## II. Scripture Reading (Acts 28:17-31), NIV 1984)

17 Three days later he called together the leaders of the Jews. When they had assembled, Paul said to them: "My brothers, although I have done nothing against our people or against the customs of

our ancestors, I was arrested in Jerusalem and handed over to the Romans. 18 They examined me and wanted to release me, because I was not guilty of any crime deserving death. 19 But when the Jews objected, I was compelled to appeal to Caesar--not that I had any charge to bring against my own people. 20 For this reason I have asked to see you and talk with you. It is because of the hope of Israel that I am bound with this chain." 21 They replied, "We have not received any letters from Judea concerning you, and none of the brothers who have come from there has reported or said anything bad about you. 22 But we want to hear what your views are, for we know that people everywhere are talking against this sect."

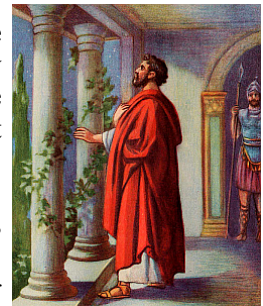
23 They arranged to meet Paul on a certain day, and came in even larger numbers to the place where he was staying. From morning till evening he explained and declared to them the kingdom of God and tried to convince them about Jesus from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets. 24 Some were convinced by what he said, but others would not believe. 25 They disagreed among themselves and began to leave after Paul had made this final statement: "The Holy Spirit spoke the truth to your forefathers when he said through Isaiah the prophet: 26 "'Go to this people and say, "You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving." 27 For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.' 28 "Therefore I want you to know that God's salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen!"

30 For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. 31 Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ.

### III. Teaching

The Book of Acts ends with **verse 31, "Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ."** Many people might have closed their mouth and stopped speaking about Jesus if they were made a prisoner and were waiting for judgment. It would be easy to decide to be quiet and avoid further trouble until knowing how things worked out.

But not Paul, Paul found new opportunities in his situation. Only three days after arriving in Rome, he called the Jewish leaders together and told them about Jesus. Some believed and some refused to believe. But when Paul could make no further progress preaching to his fellow Jews, he turned to the Gentiles and preached the Good News of Jesus to them. During this time, Paul also wrote Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians, and Philemon.



While under house arrest, Paul always had an audience for his message, because the guard was always there. Historians tell us the guard was probably changed every four hours. Therefore, over a two year period, Paul would have had the opportunity to tell many different guards about Jesus.

Being a Roman prisoner did not prevent Paul from carrying on his mission of preaching the gospel. On the contrary, it gave him so many new opportunities that in **Philippians 1:12-14**, he wrote, **"Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly."**

The church could have been discouraged or embarrassed to have such a prominent leader as Paul chained as a prisoner for so long. Instead, they saw Paul's example of bold ministry and they were encouraged to become more courageous and fearless themselves. At the same time, through the guards, the message of Jesus penetrated into the palace of Caesar and beyond. There was already a strong church in Rome before Paul arrived; his letter to the Romans makes that clear. But now the church in Rome is strengthened even more. And the gospel is able to go out to every corner of the Roman Empire.

There is an old saying about the Roman Empire, *"All roads lead to Rome."* Rome was famous for road building and across the Empire milestones

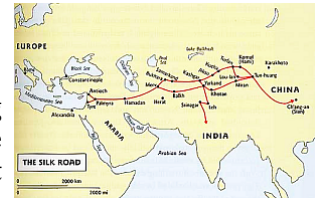


were erected saying how far it was to Rome. In 20 BC, Caesar Augustus even had a monument called the Golden Milestone erected at the place in Rome that was designated as the end point of all the roads of the Empire.

But if all roads led to Rome, then it would be equally true that all roads led from Rome. And before long, in the hearts and mouths of soldiers, traders, craftsmen, slaves, and evangelists, the gospel flowed out from Rome along every road. This flow became a flood a few years later when severe persecution against the Christians broke out in Rome.



Do you remember **Acts 8:1**? This was back when Stephen was martyred; at that time Paul was still Saul the persecutor. **“And Saul was there, giving approval to his death. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.”**



The persecutors thought they could destroy the church. But the opposite happened. **Acts 8:4** tells us why, **“Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.”** Some travelled to Antioch, where they were first called Christians. At Antioch, a powerful mission-sending church grew. Paul and Barnabas were sent out to go west. Other missionaries were sent east along the Silk Road, eventually leading to India and China. Attempts to persecute the church only hastened the spread of the Good News of Jesus to far lands.

Let’s get back to today’s passage. Paul was imprisoned for preaching Christ. In **Acts 28:20**, he told the gathered Jewish leaders, **“For this reason I have asked to see you and talk with you. It is because of the hope of Israel that I am bound with this chain.”** This phrase, **“the hope of Israel,”** comes from Jeremiah. Take a look at **Jeremiah 17:13-14**, **“O LORD, the hope of Israel, all who forsake you will be put to shame. Those who turn away from you will be written in the dust because they have forsaken the LORD, the spring of living water. Heal me, O LORD, and I will be healed; save me and I will be saved, for you are the one I praise.”**

Paul preached Jesus as Lord and Savior. In saying that he was in chains for the hope of Israel, Paul was declaring that Jesus is not only the Messiah, but also the Lord Himself, come in the flesh. This verse also reveals the sad fact that some will turn away from the salvation Jesus offers so freely. Some will be put to shame. But those who call on the Name of the Lord will praise the Lord for healing and salvation.

The reference to Jeremiah is subtle, but clear enough to those who knew the Scriptures. But Paul does not stop there; next he gives a strong warning by quoting Isaiah 6:9-10. **Acts 28:26** is the first part of the quote, **“Go to this people and say, “You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.”** If you live by a busy train line, you learn to ignore the noise of the tracks. In a similar way, many of the Jews were so accustomed to hearing the Word of God that it no longer penetrated their minds and hearts. Their ears and eyes were closed to the Good News of Jesus.

In **Acts 28:28**, Paul finally told them, **“Therefore I want you to know that God's salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen!”** as Paul foretold, the Gentile nations were more ready to listen to the Good News of salvation than the Jews. Yet, we know that some will not turn to Jesus even though the Lord desires that all be saved (**1 Timothy 2:3-4**).

Paul expressed this difficult truth in **2 Corinthians 2:15-16**, **“For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life. And who is equal to such a task?”** It is a joy to preach Jesus, but it is also a heavy responsibility. You see, the more opportunities a person has to hear the gospel, the greater their responsibility to respond. For those who continually refuse the grace of God, judgment awaits. But we cannot let this discourage us; for we know that some will believe and be saved.

**Acts 28:30**, **“For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him.”** For many years, Paul had travelled far and wide preaching Jesus. Now Paul is in chains; but he has the freedom to have guests, and many come to Paul to hear about Jesus. Whether we travel or stay home is not the most important thing. The most important thing is to be ready to speak the Name of

Jesus and love people with His love wherever we have an opportunity.

San Paolo alla Regola church stands where Paul's rented house is believed to have been. It is a beautiful and active church still today. At the front of the church there are paintings on the wall that show scenes from Paul's life.



The Book of Acts is an exciting read, but the end leaves us wanting more. What happened when Paul finally appeared before Caesar? Did Paul share the Good News of Jesus with Caesar? We don't know for sure. According to tradition, Paul was released after he saw Caesar, but this is not recorded in Acts. Why not?

There may be a clue at the beginning of Luke and Acts. Both are addressed to Theophilus, which translates as "*friend of God*." This could be a salutation, but it is probably a name. The identity of Theophilus is not known, but some think he was a Roman official that was involved in Paul's trial. If so, this would explain the abrupt ending of Acts. If Luke and Acts were submitted as evidence for Paul's defense when he appeared before Caesar, then Acts would naturally have to end before the trial began.

What happened to Paul after Acts ends? Most scholars believe that Paul appeared before Caesar and was found to be guiltless and released. After that, Paul would have continued his ministry for several more years, possibly even travelling to Spain, as he planned in Romans 15:24. However, according to tradition, when Caesar Nero began to persecute the Christians after blaming them for a major fire in Rome, Paul and Peter were thrown into prison in Rome and eventually both were martyred. Look closely at the right-hand side painting in the photo of the San Paolo alla Regola church; it shows Paul about to be beheaded.

Another church, San Paolo alle Tre Fontane, stands on the site where Paul is believed to have died. Paul was martyred, but before he died he touched the lives of tens of thousands. And still today his letters bring many to faith. Can you imagine Paul in heaven greeting the myriad of people who were drawn to Jesus through his ministry? Paul will need half of eternity just to say hello to those who came to faith through his witness!



#### IV. Conclusion

After he met Jesus on the Damascus Road, Paul made the most of every opportunity to tell others about the resurrected Lord. We would do well to follow Paul's example, making the most of the opportunities we have. It is not always easy, sometimes it is difficult and often it is hard work. But all of us have opportunities to tell others about Jesus, to share His love, and to minister in His Name.

Let's close with **Colossians 4:3-5**, "**Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should. Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity.**"

#### V. Prayer