VCBC-SLG 2022 Fall Term
The Book of Acts
Session #12: Paul's journey to Rome via Jerusalem—21:17 – 28:31

I. The Apostle Paul's Final Journey--Overview

Jerusalem (I) (21: 17-26)	Meeting with James and Elders—agreeing to appease Judaizers	Join in purification rites with four other men	Why would Paul do this?
Jerusalem (II) (21: 27-40)	Futility of "compromise"?	Ended in being arrested	Was Paul right in his "compromise"?
Jerusalem (III) (22: 1 – 23:10)	Defending (or witnessing) to Jews in Jerusalem	1st to opposing Jews in Aramaic, then to Sanhedrin	Fulfilling desire to preach the "people of Israel" (9:15)
Transfer to Caesarea (on the coast) (23: 11 - 35)	Plot to kill Paul exposed	Ended with Paul's opportunities to speak before three "kings"	Fulfilling call to preach before kings (9:15)
Caesarea 2+ years (24 -26)	24: 1-27: before Felix 25: 1-12: before Festus 25: 13 -26:32: before Agrippa	Paul appealed to Caesar lest Festus released him to the awaiting assassins (25:12)	Powerful testimonies served two purposes: wishing to convert the kings, and verdicts of vindication

Journey to Rome (27: 1-44) Caesarea – Sidon -Myra -Fair Haven- Malta	14 + days sea voyage ended in shipwreck	Paul's prophecy of safety came true	Can't imagine Paul did not evangelize the crew at the same time
Malta (28: 1-10)	Performed miracles of healing—stayed for three winter's months	Imagine the impact on the centurion, Julies, soldiers, crew and prisoners	Yet, Luke was silent about conversion in this final journey?
Paul's arrival in Rome Via Syracuse, Rhegium, Puteoli (28: 11-31)	1st sermon to Jews who had no idea of Paul's charges 2nd sermon ended with a warning to the Jews	Church in Rome: their response or involvement in Paul's ministry & what happened after 2 years-- a mystery!	The book ends with an "unfinished ending"?—the "Unfinished Symphony!"

II. Major Events:

(1) Paul's meeting with James and Elders (21: 17-36)

17 When we arrived at Jerusalem, the brothers and sisters received us warmly. 18 The next day Paul and the rest of us went to see James, and all the elders were present. 19 Paul greeted them and reported in detail what God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry.

20 When they heard this, they praised God. Then they said to Paul: "You see, brother, how many thousands of Jews have believed, and all of them are zealous for the law. 21 They have been informed that you teach all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to turn away from Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or live according to our customs. 22 What shall we do? They will certainly hear that you have come, 23 so do what we tell you. There are four men with us who have made a vow. 24 Take these men, join in their purification rites and pay their expenses, so that they can have their heads shaved. Then everyone will know there is no truth in these reports about you, but that you yourself are living in obedience to the law. 25 As for the Gentile believers, we have written to them our decision that they should abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality."

26 The next day Paul took the men and purified himself along with them. Then he went to the temple to give notice of the date when the days of purification would end and the offering would be made for each of them.

Several things needed to be addressed:

- In his epistle to the Romans, Paul appears to make mention of this particular journey to Jerusalem:
  "**Now, however, <u>I am on my way to Jerusalem</u> in the service of the Lord's people there. For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the Lord's people in Jerusalem. They were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings. So after I have completed this task and have made sure that**

they have received this contribution, I will go to Spain and visit you on the way." (Rom. 15: 25-28)

- So, most commentators believe that Paul was carrying the Gentiles' donations to the church in Jerusalem, but Luke does not mention any response from James and the elders, except that they were only concerned about the rumor of Paul's overt rejection of the Law of Moses
    - Some opine that the Jerusalem believers were so concerned about the rumor that the acceptance of donations from Gentile believers would only further fuel the rumor.
- The reception was in 2 stages, first by the brothers in general, and then by James and the elders:
    - Most believe that by then, Peter, John and the rest of the Twelve had left Jerusalem for mission work, and James was now the resident Apostle in Jerusalem who was somehow well-respected by both Christian and non-Christian Jews, the latter call him "the Just" (according to Hegesippus).
    - If the church in Jerusalem followed the patterned of Jewish traditions, there would be seventy elders in all.
- James and the elders were very concerned about the "rumor" that Paul was teaching the Jewish Christians in the Gentile churches to basically give up observing the Law of Moses, but more particularly, circumcision.

  The question is: was that really just a rumor or the actual teaching by Paul?

  Since the central issue of the Book of Galatians concerns circumcision let's read Paul's own words in this respect:
    - Galatians 2:12—"**For before certain men came from James, he (Peter) used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group**."
    - Galatians 5:6—"**For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love**."
    - Galatians 5:11—"**Brothers and sisters, if I am still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been abolished**."
    - Galatians 6:13—"**Not even those who are circumcised keep the law, yet they want you to be circumcised that they may boast about your circumcision in the flesh**."
    - Galatians 6:15—"**Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is the new creation**."
    - Galatians 5:2—"**Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all."**

  While we are not certain when exactly the Epistle to the Galatians was written, but "Paul was not only a radical theologian but one who allowed his actions to be dictated by theological motivation." (Barret, *Acts II,* 1,000) Therefore, Paul would not be one who said one thing and did another. His stance on circumcision was very clear.

- James and the elders suggested Paul to do away with the "rumor" by demonstrating his strict adherence the Law just as all Jews did and put the issue to rest by "joining the purification rites of four men"

- While now mention is made of what vow these four men had made, it is generally believed that it refers to the "Nazirite Vow" and they were not only Jews, but part of the Christian Jewish community
- The vow in general would last for 30 days during which time they would leave their hair uncut. At the end of the period they would present an offering in the temple and would have their hair cut. Another Israelite might associate himself with the Nazirites by defraying the cost of their offering which Paul was asked to do and he would also have to be purified, although the latter rite would be different from the former. It is believed that Paul needed to be purified because he had just returned from a long residence in Gentile lands and was assumed to have defiled himself, but this assumption was refuted by Paul's own words in 24:18—"**I was ceremonially clean when they found me in the temple courts during this**."

- The question often raised is why would Paul comply with their request, since his teaching against circumcision is not really a "rumor" but something he is very passionate against?
  - Most commentators opine that Paul did so to keep peace, since ultimately since: "**Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God's commands is what counts**." (I Cor. 7:19)
  - Paul himself did observe some kind of ritual by cutting his hair in Cenchreae: "**Before he sailed, he had his hair cut off at Cenchreae because of a vow he had taken**." (Acts 18:18)—so he was not doing something against his conscience
  - However, the "possibility cannot be excluded that in the interest of peace he allowed himself to be persuaded, perhaps against his better judgment, to take part in the legal requirements laid upon those who had taken vows. If so, the outcome must have speedily shown him the error of his decision." (Barret, *Acts II*, 1,000)
  - Bruce thinks that James and the elders, "*in their naivete*" put this proposal to Paul. (Bruce, *Acts*, 406)

Paul Arrested

27 When the seven days were nearly over, <u>some Jews from the province of Asia</u> saw Paul at the temple. They stirred up the whole crowd and seized him, 28 shouting, "Fellow Israelites, help us! This is the man who teaches everyone everywhere against our people and our law and this place. And besides, he has brought Greeks into the temple and defiled this holy place." 29 (They had previously seen <u>Trophimus the Ephesian</u> in the city with Paul and assumed that Paul had brought him into the temple.)

30 The whole city was aroused, and the people came running from all directions. Seizing Paul, they dragged him from the temple, and immediately the gates were shut. 31 While they were trying to kill him, news reached the commander of the Roman troops that the whole city of Jerusalem was in an uproar. 32 He at once took some officers and soldiers and ran down to the crowd. When the rioters saw the commander and his soldiers, they stopped beating Paul.

33 The commander came up and arrested him and ordered him to be bound with two chains. Then he asked who he was and what he had done. 34 Some in the crowd shouted one thing and some another, and since the commander could not get at the truth because of the uproar, he ordered that Paul be taken into the barracks. 35 When Paul reached the steps, the violence of the mob was

so great he had to be carried by the soldiers. 36 The crowd that followed kept shouting, "Get rid of him!"

- The matter was caused by those Jews from the province of Asia (likely from Ephesus) who came back to Jerusalem to observe the feast of Pentecost, and their hatred of Paul was understandable and they likely fabricated the story of Paul bringing an Ephesian Greek into the temple
- For Gentiles to enter the Court of Israel was a capital offense even endorsed by the Roman authorities. The Gentiles might visit the outer (Gentile) court which was separated from the Court of Israel with notices posted in both Greek and Latin at the entrance warning Gentiles that death was the penalty for further ingress. "Two of such notices (both in Greek) have been discovered—one in 1871 and one in 1935." (Bruce, cf. Clermont-Ganneau, 'Discovery of a Tablet form Herod's Temple'.)

My thought: I admire Paul's humbleness in seeking to appease James and the elders of Jerusalem. As much as I think he was dead set against such a compromise, he knew he was the Apostle to the Gentiles, as such his time in Jerusalem would be short anyway. But James, the elders and the believers in Jerusalem would suffer as a result of his action.

While he did not seem to have made his case about circumcision and the observance of the law during their meeting, he certainly did so through many of his writings. Perhaps, even with such a crucial biblical truth, there is a time and place for its debate. I for one put the blame squarely on James and the elders. However, everything is in God's hands, whoever fault it was (or perhaps it's not a fault of any of them), it was God's way to send Paul all the way to witness before kings and even Caesar in Rome.

(2) Paul's Witnessing to the Jews in Jerusalem (21: 37 – 23:11)

As I said during last lesson that Paul's desire to go the Jerusalem was flamed by his intense love of his own race as evidenced by his words in Romans:

"**I speak the truth in Christ—I am not lying, my conscience confirms it through the Holy Spirit— 2 I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. 3 For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my people, those of my own race.**" (Romans 9: 1-3)

And perhaps, in his own mind, witnessing to the Jews in Gentile land did not really fulfill his calling to "carry Jesus' name" before "the people of Israel". As much as the headquarters of Christendom was located in Jerusalem already, the great majority of Israel had yet to repent. Such is now made manifest in the treatment he has received. But Paul, instead of being afraid, saw this as the time God had provided for him and so boldly he testified, first before this crowd of mobs (22: 1-31), then later on before the Sanhedrin (23: 1-11)

I shall leave you to read the two sermons on our own, except that I would highlight the following:

- As the Roman soldiers were barely able to rescue him from the crowd who were beating him, his fluent Greek likely impressed the commander who allowed him to speak to the crowd on the steps of the barracks which were said to be connected to the outer court of the temple

- Paul chose to speak in Aramaic to the crowd (which the crowd somehow assumed that Paul would speak to them in Greek and that reinforced the belief that Greek was really a very common language throughout the Roman Empire). That gained their silent attention.
- Paul basically repeated his conversion testimony on the road to Damascus, but prefaced with emphasizing his high-learning of the Law under Gamaliel, his relentless zeal in persecuting the followers of the Way to death, and his presence and delight at Stephen's death.
- But the mood of the crowd changed once they heard Paul's relating Jesus' call to him: "**Go, I will send you far away to the Gentiles**." (22:21)—Such was the hatred they had for Gentiles.

- Upon Paul's disclosing his Roman citizenship, the commander "released him", but sought to find out what the fuss about by bringing him before the Sanhedrin, under the watchful eyes of the soldiers
  - The speech to the Sanhedrin seemed to be a much shorter one and Paul did not appear to share the gospel so much than stirring up a heated debate among the Sadducees and Pharisees in their midst with the assertion that he now stood trial "because of my hope in the resurrection of the dead" (23:7)
  - He succeeded in stirring the crowd in violent division, and was rescued by the troops into the barracks.
  - The whole scenario ended with the Lord standing near him at night., saying. "**Take courage. As you testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome**." (23:11)
  - Such words seem to confirm that Paul's testimony in Jerusalem was thus intended by the Lord in his initial calling, and so was his eventual presence in Rome.
- The plot by more than 40 Jewish men who vowed to assassinate Paul was overheard by Paul's nephew who spoiled their attempt by reporting to the commander who decided to escort Paul with his cavalry all the way to the coast where Caesarea was under the jurisdiction of Governor Felix.

(3) Paul's Witnessing to the three "kings" (24 - 26)

What follows is the fulfillment of the Lord's prophecy and charge to Paul to carry His name before the kings (or rulers), notably

- Felix, the Governor of Judea (24)
- Festus who succeeded Felix after two years (25), and
- King Agrippa—whose capital city was Caesarea Philippi (not the coastal Caesarea) (26)

I'll leave you to read each of the defenses on your own, except to highlight the following:

(i) Defense before Governor Felix (ch. 24)

- High Priest Ananias brought his entourage to Caesarea to present his case against Paul
- Likely hiring an Italian lawyer by the name of Tertullus
- The charge against Paul: "We have found this man to be a troublemaker, stirring up riots among the Jews all over the world. He is a ringleaders of the Nazarene sect and

even tried to desecrate the temple…" (24: 5-7)—If that were proven would likely have Paul sentenced to death under Roman Law

- Paul's 1st defense focused on his innocence in the temple-incident and emphasized the similarities of their beliefs, especially in the hope of resurrection.
- Felix "was well acquainted with the Way" (24:22) and visited Paul several times with hope of obtaining a bribe from him
- Paul enjoyed relative freedom with friends taking care of his needs, but still kept in jail by Felix for gaining favor from Jews for some two years.

(ii) Defense before Festus (ch. 25)

- The Jews pressured Festus to hear the case in Jerusalem still plotting to ambush Paul on his way and just as Festus was trying to oblige, Paul had no choice but to appeal to Caesar (25: 11)—to avoid the assassination.
- King Agrippa happened to pay visit to this new governor and was asked to listen to Paul's case as well. In so doing, Luke records Festus' verdict of Paul in that "**they did not charge him any of the crimes I had expected (i.e. that of rioting etc.) Instead, they had some point of dispute with him about their religion and about a dead man named Jesus who Paul claimed was alive.**" (25:18-19)
- King Agrippa agreed to hear Paul's defense (so that Festus could have something specific to write on Paul's appeal to Caesar).

(iii) Defense before King Agrippa (ch. 26)

- Paul first appealed to the Herod's expert knowledge of Judaism
  - Then he retold his early commitment to oppose Jesus followed by another detailed account of conversion with a clear gospel message of sins, forgiveness and faith in the resurrected Jesus—proving that Christ's sufferings and resurrection were foretold by Moses and the prophets
  - Ending with a direct appeal to King Agrippa, "**Do you believe the prophets? I know you do!**" (26: 27)
- The responses by Festus and Agrippa were note-worthy
  - "**Your great learning is driving you insane**." (Festus told Paul, v. 24)
  - "**Do you think in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?"** (Agrippa told Paul, v.28)
- "**Agrippa said to Festus, 'This man could have been set free, if he had not appealed to Caesar**.'" (v.32)
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(4) Finally in Rome (28: 11-31)

I'll leave you to read Paul's interesting sea journey to Rome which took over three months due to wintery weather (ch. 27 & ch. 28: 1-10) in which Luke demonstrated sound knowledge of ancient seafaring and geography.

"11 After three months we put out to sea in a ship that had wintered in the island—it was an Alexandrian ship with the figurehead of the twin gods Castor and Pollux. 12 We put in at Syracuse and stayed there three days. 13 From there we set sail and arrived at Rhegium.

The next day the south wind came up, and on the following day we reached Puteoli. 14 There we found some brothers and sisters who invited us to spend a week with them. <u>And so we came to Rome</u>.

- **15 The brothers and sisters there had heard that we were coming, and they traveled as far as the Forum of Appius (40 miles from Rome—2 days' journey) and the Three Taverns (33 miles from Rome) to meet us. At the sight of these people Paul thanked God and was encouraged. 16 When we got to Rome, Paul was allowed to live by himself, with a soldier to guard him.**

Points to note:

- The "We" narrative comes an end after v.16 and it is believed the letter to the Colossians and Philemon were written during Paul's confinement here;
- Paul's special treatment was likely a result of the impact of his preaching and many miracles performed during the more than three months' journey on the commander and his soldiers
- Based on the Epistle to the Romans, it is obvious that a church existed already at the time, and their knowledge and desire to meet the Apostle drove them to travel far
- However, their quick disappearance from the scene was very puzzling indeed prompting speculations about their distancing from a prisoner on trial (living in the capital city of Rome carried with it increased political sensitivity—this was where Nero resided!)

17 <u>Three days later he called together the local Jewish leaders</u>.

- **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 The Jews objected, so I was compelled to make an appeal to Caesar. I certainly did not intend to bring any charge 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 our people 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."**

Points to note:

- Since the wintry weather had caused much havoc and delay of Paul's journey escorted by soldiers, it would not be surprising that the Jews in Jerusalem would not risk taking such a dangerous journey even if they wanted to present their case.

- Also, very unlike Judea and Syria, Rome was not known to be too welcoming to Jews (as Aquilla and Priscilla were forced out of Rome earlier)
- But they did confirm that "people (Jews) everywhere are talking against this sect", meaning the general impression among Jews about Christianity was negative!
- By describing Christianity as a "sect", it was still very much looked upon as part of Judaism.
- That might also imply that, given the location of Rome, the Roman Christians might be rather low-key, unlike those in Syrian Antioch, by comparison!

23 They arranged to meet Paul on a certain day, and came in even larger numbers to the place where he was staying. He witnessed to them from morning till evening, explaining about the kingdom of God, and from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets he tried to persuade them about Jesus. 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 ancestors 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!"

Points to note:

- As much as the warning given by Paul against the Jews, it was obvious that in that two years' period, Paul was able to witness to, and convert quite a number of people, both Jews and Gentiles, including Roman soldiers who stood guard over him;
- At this point, he was able to rent a rather spacious home to house that many visitors (unlike his eventual cell which is believed to be very tiny, stone-cold and beneath ground)
- His final statement was directed to the unbelieving Jews, but did not signify the end of Jewish mission necessarily, but rather it served to arouse the "envy" of his people that "**because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious**." (Romans 11:11)

(5) Final Word by Luke—The Unfinished Symphony! (28: 30-31)

30 For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. 31 He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ—with all boldness and without hindrance!

Almost all commentators feel a bit surprised by the non-ending of the Book of Acts which leaves the following questions unanswered:

(i) What happened to Paul after the "two years"?
(ii) What is the message of this "ending"?

Paul's trials:

Even early church fathers had differing takes on what happened after these two years of unhindered ministry by Paul

- Some opine the Paul was released (*because of the expiry of the 2 years or 18 months' of statutory limitations as proposed by Cadbury, but such a view was refuted by Sherwin-White who pointed out that Cadbury was quoting from Roman Laws in the 6th century AD*) and he returned to some of the past places of ministry only to be arrested again with more serious charges leading up to his execution by Nero between AD 64-66;
- Some think that after two years, Paul lost his complete freedom, leading to his final execution;
- Some think that Paul did go on to face 1st trial (Col. 4:10) then followed by a 2nd trial which led to his execution—see Colossians 4 and II Timothy 4 below:

"**My fellow prisoner Aristarchus** (see Acts 27:2) **sends you greetings, as does Mark the cousin of Barnabas. You have received instructions about him; if he comes to you, welcome him."** (Col. 4:10)

"**Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry…At my 1st defense, no one came to my support (likely referring to the church in Rome), but everyone deserted me**." (II Timothy 4: 11, 16)

Based on these words from Colossians and II Timothy, we know that

- Definitely there were two trials after the "two years" of unhindered ministry
- The 1st trial was not easy and "everyone"—likely referring to the church in Rome—deserted him out of fear of Nero, and
- There might not be a release between first and second trial—Paul would be still in chain in the interim, but many of his confidants traveled from various places to join him.
- Paul did face execution, but whether at the same time with Peter, and whether at the result of Nero's burning of Rome or before that incident—we can only speculate together with all commentators past and present!

The "Unending" of the Book of Acts

Below is a summary of the historical views in this respect:

1. Luke was writing at the time to which these verses refer; he wrote no more because nothing more had happened…
2. Luke planned to take the story further in a 3rd volume which either was never written or has been lost;
3. Luke did not record Paul's martyrdom because he wished to avoid parallels both with the acts of the pagan martyrs and with the story of Jesus;

4. Luke did not record Paul's martyrdom because it would not have interested him or his readers; they were concerned with theology, not with biography;
5. It was sufficiently indicated by v.30 that, after two years had elapsed, Paul would automatically be released;
6. Luke did not recount Paul's death because he did not wish to encourage a piety of martyrdom;
7. Luke did not need to recount Paul's trial and its outcome because his readers already knew the facts.
8. Acts 28 summarizes and rounds off the rest of his narrative.

(Barret quoting from Wilson, ICC, *Acts II*, 1249)

I do not think Luke did not end his narrative properly, rather

(i) He closes the whole book with an *inclusio* just as how he opens his book

- "**He (Jesus) appeared to them over a period of 40 days and spoke about the kingdom of God**" (1:3)
- "**Boldly and without hindrance, he (Paul) preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ**." (28: 31)

In other words, what began and was commissioned by the Lord Jesus Christ has been faithfully carried on the Apostle Paul—the Word of God cannot be hindered under any circumstances.

(ii) Yes, nothing needs to be added, as Luke intends to tell us that Paul has faithfully discharged his commission at the time of his call"

- "**Go. This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name**." (9:15-16)

Yes, indeed, Paul has faithfully discharged his heavenly calling, and if Acts was written after Paul's martyrdom, Luke would likely have also included in Acts, as that would pertain to "how much (Paul) must suffer."

(iii) In a much larger view, the Great commission of Acts 1:8 has been carried out by the Apostles of the time:
"**(Y)ou will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth**."

- Rome was more than likely not considered the "ends of the earth", but Acts testifies to the faithfulness of the Apostles and 1st-generation disciples; they have completed the 1st phase of the Great Commission—they did what they could;
- The disciples of Jesus Christ in the subsequent almost 2,000 years have followed their footsteps to bring the gospel to practically the ends of the earth (which even the Apostle Paul would not have envisaged—even we, who are from the "Far" East, could have heard and believed in the gospel);
- Now, like Schubert's Unfinished Symphony, we are to finish writing the last movement of Christ's Symphony of Salvation for the entire world!