

A Study of the Acts of the Apostles
Week Thirty-Four
Acts 28:1-31

Day One

28:1 Once safely on shore, we found out that the island was called Malta. 2 The islanders showed us unusual kindness. They built a fire and welcomed us all because it was raining and cold. 3 Paul gathered a pile of brushwood and, as he put it on the fire, a viper, driven out by the heat, fastened itself on his hand. 4 When the islanders saw the snake hanging from his hand, they said to each other, "This man must be a murderer; for though he escaped from the sea, Justice has not allowed him to live." 5 But Paul shook the snake off into the fire and suffered no ill effects. 6 The people expected him to swell up or suddenly fall dead, but after waiting a long time and seeing nothing unusual happen to him, they changed their minds and said he was a god.

vs. 1&2 – Paul and his companions found themselves on the island of Malta. As if they hadn't been through enough already, the weather was also bad—rainy and cold. I have believed and I know many others who have as well, that if I serve the Lord certain things won't take place or happen to me. Of course, the longer I walk with the Lord, the more I have come to realize that isn't true. Faith is no protection from the storms but a means through the storms of life. And I have learned that things can get worse than I ever thought possible, teaching me that the Lord is my only hope and refuge in times of trouble. I would never learn that from a book—I have to experience it.

In the midst of their trouble, the people of the island showed kindness to them, building a fire to warm the shipwrecked visitors. During dark times, God will often use people you don't know and who don't know you to comfort and encourage you. He does this show you that He is your source, even of encouragement and practical care.

vs. 3&4 – Paul never seemed to have any “break” from his purpose of taking the gospel to the Gentiles. Here we see that the great apostle was gathering firewood. Paul was a humble man, and no task was below his effort. But while he was doing this, a snake came out and bit him. I want to pray here, “Lord, leave the man alone. He's been through enough. Just allow him to have some rest.” But God knew and knows best, and God sent the snake to give Paul an opportunity to bear witness to the truth of Jesus.

The islanders came to the same conclusion that most people would come to—something bad had happened to Paul because he was a bad person. They didn't even know Paul, but felt they had an omen to prove his wickedness. A subtle offshoot of this thinking exists among Christians when we believe that others don't have enough faith to prevent something “bad” from taking place. Of course, the islanders were wrong about Paul and believers are wrong to connect bad things happening to someone's lack of faith.

v. 5&6 – Then when the people saw that nothing bad happened to Paul after the snake bit him, they assumed that he was a god. The same attitude exists today, for when

something good happens, most people believe that it is due to someone's merits. The truth is that good and bad are in God's hands and He uses them all for His glory in the life of His children. The good is seldom due to someone's good and the bad seldom due to someone's bad. I have come to the conclusion that God treats me better than I deserve. I am learning to say as Job did:

At this, Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground in worship and said: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised." In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing" (Job 1:20-22).

Day Two

7 There was an estate nearby that belonged to Publius, the chief official of the island. He welcomed us to his home and for three days entertained us hospitably. 8 His father was sick in bed, suffering from fever and dysentery. Paul went in to see him and, after prayer, placed his hands on him and healed him. 9 When this had happened, the rest of the sick on the island came and were cured. 10 They honored us in many ways and when we were ready to sail, they furnished us with the supplies we needed.

vs. 7&8 – The chief official welcomed some of the 276, presumably the commander and his guests, to his home, where they stayed for three days. God continued to use Paul and provide opportunities for him to bear witness to the Lord and His power. Publius' father was ill, so Paul laid his hands on the father and he was healed. Again, I would think that the Lord would give Paul some "down time," and that Paul earned it. But Paul was on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week for the cause of Christ as a dispenser of God's grace and power.

I am so struck by Paul's availability to God without regard to personal comfort or needs. *Lord, help me to be like Paul, available to You at all times for Your purpose and glory. God, deliver me from self to be selfless in Your work. I don't deserve a break unless it is to help me do more for You. I'm not my own, so use me as you see fit. Amen.*

v. 9 – For some reason, God wanted to heal all the people on this island who were sick and came to Paul. One healing led to many more, but we don't see any evidence that their healing was connected or led to their salvation. It seemed that Paul was their agent for healing but didn't preach or deliver the gospel message. That may not have been the case, for perhaps Luke didn't record all that took place. **How freely do you dispense God's blessings to others? Do you do it without even expecting them to turn to God? That truly would be freely dispensing God's grace.**

v. 10 – So it would seem that they had another ship in quick order and were ready to continue their voyage to Rome once the winter months had ended. The islanders provided them with supplies and on they went to continue Paul's trek to Rome and Caesar. I don't know if I would be ready to get on another ship that quickly, but I suppose they had no choice.

It seems that Paul had to learn not to be driven by the urgency of anything. He had just languished for two years in Caesarea and now was stranded on his way to Rome for three months, having survived a harrowing shipwreck. In contrast I study my own life that is often driven by the tyranny of so many things that need to be done and people that need to be visited. Paul didn't only live faith and trust during times of trouble, but in all seasons and circumstances. The world desperately needed what Paul had and the message that he preached, but God did not seem to be in a hurry to dispense the message. **I want to learn that kind of trust and patience, do you?**

Day Three

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 who invited us to spend a week with them. And so we came to Rome. 15 The brothers there had heard that we were coming, and they traveled as far as the Forum of Appius and the Three Taverns to meet us. At the sight of these men 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.

v. 11 – So after a three-month break at Malta, the party proceeded to Rome on an Egyptian ship. The ship had the twin gods as a figurehead, which was common for ships of this era. These gods were the two semi-gods who made up the constellation Gemini and were considered to be good luck omens for mariners. This is almost humorous, for the ship was carrying Paul, whose favor with God saved his 276 traveling companions. You don't need "good luck" when you have God in your corner.

v. 12 – Syracuse is on the island of Sicily, but was destroyed by an earthquake in the 17th century. History states that there has been a Christian presence in the city ever since Paul's three-day visit. I could find no such record for Malta, where Paul stayed for three months. Our results from missions and evangelism are always in God's hands. We work hard and trust the Lord for the results. I had someone advise me once, "Pray like everything depends on God and then work like everything depends on you." I think that is good advice and I have tried to follow it ever since.

vs. 13&14 – Luke's account shows that he was indeed on the voyage, for he recounted the exact path any ship would take to Rome from Malta. I don't understand, however, how the brothers in Puteoli could ask them to stay with them a week since Paul was a prisoner. At the same time, Paul did have some freedom and it appears that this is where their sea voyage came to an end and they approached Rome by land.

And Paul finally reached Rome. Yet there were already many believers there in Rome. No matter how important any one man or woman is, God is not dependent on them for His work. Paul was there to preach to Caesar but there was already an established church

in Rome and the surrounding regions. I must never think that I am the only one who is working for God and I must never underestimate God's ability to work on His own. When I went to Afghanistan a few years ago, I was amazed to find many Christians who had met the Lord in Pakistan when they fled the Taliban. And some had met Jesus in dreams when He appeared to them and told them He was the one they were looking for.

v. 15 – The brothers in Rome heard about Paul's' coming, probably from those who told the story of his shipwreck. The Roman believers then came about 50 miles to see Paul as he approached Rome. That's a long way to come to see someone who is already coming to see you. They could have waited but they were so excited that they honored the man of God by coming to meet him. And the effect was that Paul was encouraged and cheered. **What can you do today to go out of your way to bring cheer and gladness to someone else? These men made a special trip and the apostle was encouraged. We should always endeavor to live our lives with the same effect.**

I was just in a city where I lived for 14 years. While I was there, I prayed and had four meetings with people to encourage them. I know that God led me to have these four meetings and I am glad I obeyed. All the people left the meetings encouraged and challenged in their purpose.

v. 16 – Due to the nature of Paul's charges, he was permitted to live by himself, with only a soldier to guard him. Many believe that this soldier would have been chained to Paul at all times. I find this hard to believe. But there is another tradition that I find easy to believe. That tradition says that Paul led every guard he ever had to know Jesus! The Romans would constantly change the guard after the soldier came to faith, only to have the same result with the next guard. **God used Paul in such a powerful way, whether with royalty, large crowds or one-on-one. How about you? Are the people you are "chained" to at work, in your neighborhood or in ministry impacted by their contact with you? What can you do to make an even greater impact in your world?**

Day Four

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."

v. 17 – I admire Paul's resilience and commitment. The Jews in Jerusalem had treated him terribly, leading to his imprisonment and troubled journey to Rome. But three days after he arrived in Rome, Paul called together the leaders of the Jews. He was truly committed to his ministry philosophy of going to the Jew first no matter what the circumstances.

Do you have a ministry philosophy? I have a leadership philosophy and I have a list of governing values that guide my decisions. When I teach people how to develop their values, I outline a few of Paul's values that directed his decisions. They are:

1. He took no financial support from the people among whom he worked (see 1 Corinthians 9:12);
2. He built on no one else's ministry foundation (see Romans 15:20);
3. He went to the Jew first (see Acts 13:46);
4. He always traveled with a team (see Acts 16:3-13).

To learn how to develop your own values and leadership philosophy, go to <http://www.purposequest.com/articles.htm> and find the article there that will help you do just that. You will find a complete list of my values in that document.

v. 18 – Paul was honest and forthright about why he was in Rome, not hiding anything from the Jews there. Paul wasn't worried about his reputation, but only about spreading the message of Jesus to his people first and then the Gentiles. He didn't sound bitter, for he knew that he was innocent. **Are you bitter over anything that has happened in your past? Can you see God's hand in what happened? Can you release the people that you have held responsible and see that it was the Lord who was moving you on, up or out?**

v. 19 – Paul had no choice but to appeal to Caesar, as you remember, or else he would have been the victim of a Jewish assassination plot. So now he was in Rome, where he had been eager to come for some time:

It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else's foundation. Rather, as it is written: "Those who were not told about him will see, and those who have not heard will understand." This is why I have often been hindered from coming to you. But now that there is no more place for me to work in these regions, and since I have been longing for many years to see you, I plan to do so when I go to Spain. I hope to visit you while passing through and to have you assist me on my journey there, after I have enjoyed your company for a while (Romans 15:19-24).

God had granted Paul's wish but not in the manner that he expected. So he was finally in Rome and the Roman government had paid his way!

v. 20 – Paul was bound to a Roman guard with a chain, but he was a free man. He was fulfilling his purpose, even though the Jewish leaders back in Jerusalem thought they were finally rid of Paul. But there he was, preaching to their brethren in Rome and those leaders back home were powerless to do anything to stop him. He had the sanction of Rome to do what he was doing!

I am applying this lesson to my own life, for there are many doors closed to me right now. But the ones that are open are providing glorious opportunities. So I must not fret

over the closed doors, but see that God has closed them (for now). Then I must make the most of the open doors. **Can you see this dynamic in your own life, work or ministry? What open doors are before you? Are you making the most of those openings?**

Day Five

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."

v. 21 – I always find this comment strange. The Sanhedrin had a contract out to kill Paul, yet no one ever brought news of him to Rome. I would imagine they didn't think Paul would ever get that far. And given the conditions under which Paul had just traveled to Rome, I doubt if any Jew could have gotten to Rome from Jerusalem faster than he did. I had a pastor once who was very controversial in some of his teaching. He said to me once, "Not everyone's against you. Most people don't care that much." And I have found that to be true.

When someone opposes you, it can seem like everyone opposes you. And, of course, that's just what the devil wants you to think. But that isn't true. Many supporters don't speak up on your behalf (due to intimidation or fear) and others don't know enough to take a stand one way or the other, so they remain silent as well.

Earlier in Acts, Paul was in trouble in Corinth, but the Lord spoke to him, and basically said what my pastor said to me:

One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: "Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city." So Paul stayed for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God (Acts 18:9-11).

Does it seem like everyone's against you now? Can you see that isn't true? Even though you may not know who is for you, many probably are and most at least aren't against you. So be encouraged today and don't be intimidated by those who are more vocal and angry in their opposition. If no one is that angry with you, then why not? That may mean you are playing it too safe, being too cautious:

Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for that is how their fathers treated the false prophets (Luke 6:26).

v. 22 – While the Roman Jews had not received anything specific concerning Paul, they had received plenty of reports about The Way, and they were all bad. When people speak against you when you do God's will, they are really speaking against God. That is why you cannot take their insults or opposition personally.

But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. It is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil (1 Peter 3:15-18).

Peter warned that some would slander those who follow Jesus. The word slander is defined as “the uttering or spreading of a false statement or statements, harmful to another’s character or reputation; legally, slander is spoken whereas libel is written.”

It is easy to be upset when you are the target of slanderous talk. But then again, Jesus was subject to slander on a regular basis. And He promised that the followers would experience what the Master had encountered. So slander isn’t something that should surprise us—but it usually does. Just make sure that you aren’t the source of slander; you cannot control, however, whether you are the target of slander. So serve the Lord, obey Him, entrust your reputation to Him and fulfill your purpose.

Day Six

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:

v. 23 – I wish I had the tapes or notes from those sessions. I can only imagine how profound Paul’s insight must have been on the topic of the kingdom of God. The phrase “kingdom of God” can also be rendered government of God. And God wants to govern here on earth just like He does in heaven, as evidenced by the wording in the Lord’s prayer. God isn’t just interested in saving us, but in bringing us under His rule in every area of life—not just church life.

Paul always began by ministering to the Jews and then moved on to the Gentiles. I think this represented a personal value for Paul. If that strategy represented a Biblical mandate, we would all have to do the same whenever we went to an area for ministry.

I appreciate how Paul took them to the Scriptures from which he did his teaching and persuasion. If that is the pattern that Paul used, I think we should follow it, don’t you? But we must always keep in mind that the Scriptures should lead to a better understanding and reverence for Jesus and not just an intellectual grasp of the Bible’s themes:

You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life (John 5:39-40).

I have known some people who have worshipped the Bible but not the God of the Bible. Does that sound strange? The Bible is the truth, but it isn't all the truth there is. Jesus is all the truth there is and He is the aim and goal of our study and worship. Do you agree with this? Does it make you nervous when I write that the Bible isn't all the truth there is?

v. 24 – The results of our preaching and teaching about Jesus are always the same: some are convinced and some aren't. It seems that those studying with Paul had some choice in the matter, doesn't it? Some refused and some came to the correct conclusion that Jesus was indeed Lord and God. You should never be discouraged when someone rejects your efforts to convince them of the truth.

v. 25 – Paul then quoted a verse about the hard hearts of God's people, which we will look at tomorrow. This caused them to leave Paul's presence, divided over the issue of Jesus and offended that Paul attached this judgment to them. It is so hard when someone believes that they are God's protector and special agent to see the truth about the condition of their heart and life.

Notice that Paul acknowledged that the Holy Spirit spoke to God's people through the mouths of the prophets. And if the Holy Spirit spoke through the prophets, He also spoke through the words in their books and testimonies. So Paul acknowledged the inspired nature of Scripture, accepting it as the very words of God. Thus Paul had no hesitation to use the Bible as his point of reference for preaching, teaching and life. If Paul had this high of a view of Scripture, we should have one as well. That is why I am devoting eight years of my life to developing these New Testament studies. God's word is worthy of the investment and the Word is changing me as I attempt to record my insights.

Day Seven

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.

vs. 26&27 – Paul quoted Isaiah 6:9 in this context, just as Jesus had quoted the same (see Matthew 13:14) when He was confronted with the Jews hardness of heart. This prophesy was fulfilled in Isaiah's, Jesus' and Paul's times. They could not hear because their heart had become hard. Even though they constantly sought after and talked about spiritual

things, they could no longer hear or see the truth. That fascinates me! And it frightens me, too. The Jews were zealous for the things of God, but refused to adapt to this new revelation about Jesus. They had put God in a box, so to speak, that when God came out of the box in Jesus, they could not accept the truth. They had become spiritually inflexible. I don't want to ever get like that, do you? I want to be open to what God is doing and saying up to the end of my life. We saw yesterday that some of the Jews would not believe even though I'm sure Paul made a convincing case for Jesus.

v. 28 – So Paul made his declaration that he would now turn his attention to the Gentiles, and he knew by experience that some of them would believe and turn to Jesus. But we know that God was moving among the Gentiles with His eye still on Israel:

I am talking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I make much of my ministry in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them. For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead? (Romans 11:13-16).

God isn't through with Israel yet, but they can only come to God on one basis: through the blood and atoning work of Jesus.

vs. 29&30 – I always feel like Acts ends too soon. I want to know more about what Paul did, who he talked to, and what happened with his appeal to Caesar. But Luke takes us up to Paul's presentation to the Roman Jews and then summarizes the next two years in two sentences! Perhaps Luke wanted to finish his work and just decided to wrap it up and send it off to Theophilus.

Again we see that God used Paul's trial to provide a wonderful opportunity for him to minister in Rome, which had been one of Paul's objectives. I'm sure there were times before that when Paul assumed his ministry and life were over. Yet the sovereign Lord opened many doors even after his imprisonment and many Roman officials heard the gospel through Paul's efforts.

As we close this study, I urge you to make the most of every opportunity to fulfill your purpose, whether in large ways or small. Be faithful like Paul was to make the most of your time and do the work that you were created to do. Truly Paul was one of the great men and leaders of all time. He was not a perfect man, but he was one who did great things for God.

I have always wondered, however, if this book should not be referred to as the Acts of the Holy Spirit instead of the Acts of the Apostles. The focus of the book is on the apostles—first those who walked with Jesus (referred to as apostles of the Lamb) and then Paul. But the book is also full of references and examples of the Holy Spirit initiatives that changed the course of history. If you are like me, a non-Jew, then you should rejoice in the truth of Acts, for here we see that God graciously opened His heart to us Gentiles as predicted in Isaiah 65:1 and quoted in Paul's letter to the Romans:

And Isaiah boldly says, "I was found by those who did not seek me; I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me." (Romans 10:20).

As we close this study, I urge you to meditate on how you can add to this book. No, I am not implying that we can write Scripture; the canon of Scripture is finished. But we can do what Paul and the others did, and that's carry our purpose in the power of the Spirit to a dying world that needs Jesus, the only hope.

So Lord, as we close this study, I pray that you would empower us to change our world as the apostles changed theirs. Give us the same dynamic of the Holy Spirit to launch bold initiatives for You. I pray that You would speak to us and lead us. May we not harden our hearts, content to read about You and Your saints. Help us to take our place and continue the work that the apostles began. We don't want to be history readers but history makers. And we pray all this in the name of Jesus our Lord. Amen and amen!