

## **ACTS 28 – Paul Finally Makes It to Rome**

In today's lesson Paul will finally make it to Rome! As you recall from last time, Paul started his long journey to Rome from Caesarea. But by the end of Chapter 27 he still had not reached Rome. Why not? What delayed him? Do you remember?

A shipwreck! That is what has delayed Paul. So, in the last lesson we looked at the rather action-packed account of a shipwreck. It is the only detailed account of a shipwreck in all of the Bible.

This is how it happened...

Paul and company boarded an Alexandrian grain ship at Myra. They made it to Crete and were docked on the southern coast of Crete at Fair Havens. Paul said, "we should stay here." The majority however said, "No, we want to try to make it to Phoenix (just down the coast)." But they did not quite make it. The winds all of a sudden shifted, came from the north and blew them out into the Mediterranean Sea. They are out in the open sea in the middle of a storm trying to gain control of their ship. They were having all kinds of issues. They had to toss parts of the ship and the cargo overboard to lighten and gain control of the ship. They basically drifted for a little over two weeks out in the open Mediterranean Sea. Eventually, some 600 miles from where they left at Fair Havens, they made it to the island of Malta. They ran aground on the east side of that island.

The ship quickly broke apart on the rocks in the pounding surf. Miraculously, every person on board this ship survived! All 276 passengers and crew made it safely to the beach. While we know that they are on the island of Malta, at this point they have no idea where they are.

Tired, cold, wet and weary from their ordeal, one by one each person drags himself ashore. They are just thankful to be alive. Let's pick up the narrative in Acts Chapter 28 and v 1...

READ Acts 28:1

So now they know. Tradition holds that this shipwreck occurs on the northeast coast of Malta in what is now referred to as St. Paul's Bay. The seasoned sailors would have been familiar with Malta because they often used the harbor of Valetta. But that is on the other side of the island from where they are at. That is on the west side, the opposite side of the island from where the wreck takes place. So, their present location would have been unfamiliar to them. That is why they do not immediately recognize where they are.

READ Acts 28:2

Even though the local islanders do not speak their language, kindness is a universal language. It says here that the natives showed unusual kindness, extraordinary kindness, by building a fire for the 276 shivering wet castaways. It is early November, so it is cold outside and rainy and windy. You can just imagine how welcome this fire on the beach is for our weary travelers!

Have you ever been camping? After the campfire is started, what do people normally do immediately? They go around the area picking up wood for the fire. So, that is what Paul and others get busy doing after the fire is started.

READ Acts 28:3-6

In the course of Paul gathering wood for the fire, a poisonous snake bites him. It says that a viper "fastened on his hand." The natives reason (their pagan theology) that Paul must be a very bad man who deserves punishment. That is why this has happened. There are a whole lot of people out there who believe that when bad things happen to you it is because you deserve it. God is punishing you. Sure, he had been saved from the shipwreck, but now the gods are giving him what he deserves. Knowing just how deadly this particular type of snake is, they sit back expecting Paul to drop dead at any moment. Imagine their surprise as Paul simply shakes the snake off and continues about his business as though nothing ever happened. They do not get it. Why does Paul not die? Could it

be that Paul had built up an immunity to snakebites? Is that the reason? No. The reason why Paul is unfazed by this viper is because God's hand of protection is upon him. We have seen that throughout the book of Acts. Jesus Himself had promised Paul back when he was in Jerusalem that he was going to Rome and to Rome he will go. No power on earth can stand in the way of that.

Well, after some time passes and Paul still is not dead, the natives change their opinion about Paul. They go to the opposite extreme and say that Paul must be some kind of a god! Wrong again. Paul is no god, but rather, he is a man inhabited and blessed by the one true God.

READ Acts 28:7

This man Publius, "the chief man of the island," puts all 276 of the shipwrecked men up at his house (it must have been a big house) for three whole days. He feeds them and entertains them. He goes all out for these total strangers. God will reward Publius for his kindness and generosity as we will see in these next verses.

READ Acts 28:8-9.

The word for "healed" in v 8 is not the usual word for a miraculous healing. It literally means, "to receive medical attention." It may be that Luke (who is a physician) assisted Paul in this effort. What Luke describes here is that Publius' father has gastric fever accompanied with dysentery. One commentary I read speculated that it was probably infected goat's milk but we do not know. At that time there would have been no medical solution for this. What Paul does, then, is by the direction and by the power of the Holy Spirit. God is the One who provides the healing and He does it through Paul. I believe that God heals Publius's father as a reward for Publius's hospitality. I do not know that for sure. It is just my opinion. Paul prays for and lays his hands on Publius's father. Publius never asks Paul to heal his father. That never takes place. He does not know that Paul can do that. Paul goes and prays for him and God gives the healing. God is the One who miraculously heals this man.

Well, the news quickly spreads across the island about what this guy Paul had done (even though he really did not do it – it was God). Soon Paul finds himself busy as people from all over the island flock to him. It reminds me of when word got out about Jesus and His healing. All of a sudden everyone shows up at Peter's house (Mark 1:33-34). The same happens here. It does not take long for the word to get out. The people are coming and Paul does not turn anyone away. Again, Luke assists Paul in helping to cure the people with whatever limited resources they have. These verses show the awesome power of God to heal on display. In turn, this points the people of Malta to the Great Physician, to the Lord Jesus. I am sure Paul found opportunity to preach. So, these verses are not about Paul the healer at all. Instead, they are a testimony to the healing power of God working through His servant Paul.

READ Acts 28:10

In only a few months on the island of Malta, Paul wins the hearts of all its citizens. To show their gratitude, the people shower Paul and his traveling companions with honors. When the time comes for them to leave, they will be supplied with the necessary provisions for their voyage to Rome. So often, as we have seen through the book of Acts, when Paul travels somewhere, things do not end well for him. We have seen that time and time again. Here will be a uniquely joyous parting for Paul – being appreciated and treated kindly by the people of Malta.

Meanwhile the Roman commander, Julius, has not been sitting around idly. He needs to get his prisoners to Rome. He learns that there is another Alexandrian grain ship anchored for the winter at Malta, at the port of Valetta (on the other side of the island). He makes the necessary arrangements with the captain of that ship. By mid-February of 61 A.D., three months or so after their shipwreck, Paul and his traveling party get underway. They now board Ship Number Three.

READ Acts 28:11

The “twin gods” that identify this ship (on the ship’s figurehead) are twin brothers Castor and Pollux. Based on Roman mythology, these are the twin sons of the gods Zeus and Leda. The pagans view these brothers as the patron deities of sailors.

READ Acts 28:12-14

The trip from Malta to Syracuse probably did not take very long – maybe a day. At Syracuse the ship docks for three days and then proceeds on to Rhegium. With favorable winds it sails north around what we call the “boot” of Italy. From there it is up the coast to the port of Puteoli. Puteoli is a really good port because it has a sheltered bay. It is the nearest port to Rome that they can sail to. Rome’s harbor is not deep enough to accommodate their rather large ship. For this reason, their ship stops at Puteoli. This is bad news for Paul and company because it means that they will have to walk the remaining 142 miles to Rome. By the way, Puteoli is the modern city of Naples, Italy.

Before we go on any further, I just want to make a comment. Paul had sent greetings to the Christians at Rome about three years earlier when he had been in Corinth (third missionary journey). In Romans Chapters 15 and 16 there are a whole lot of greetings to real people that he knows and that he is looking forward to seeing. Little did Paul know back then that he would eventually arrive in Rome as a prisoner. The Christian brothers at Puteoli had heard of Paul probably from his letter to the Romans. Remember that most of these letters were circulated to churches in the region where they were delivered. So then, the people in Rome would have shared Paul’s letter with other Christians in the churches around Rome. What a privilege it was for the Christians at Puteoli to finally meet the great Apostle Paul!

The Roman commander Julius allows Paul and company a one-week rest in Puteoli before they continue the last leg of their journey, the long walk to Rome via the Appian Way. This is one of the oldest highways in the world and much of it has been preserved to this day. You talk about a well-

built road! So, when you tour Rome and Italy today you can see the Appian Way. It was a major highway in Paul's day.

READ Acts 28:15

Word of Paul's arrival reaches the church at Rome. The Christian brothers there hurry down to meet Paul and join him as he makes his way into Rome. The first delegation meets Paul at the Forum or the market of Appius, which is about 43 miles from Rome. One commentary said this: "They honored Paul by greeting him as the emperors were greeted when they arrived at Rome: they went out to meet him as he came into the city, walking the long journey... to welcome Paul and his companions." So, this is really a big celebration.

A second delegation from Rome joins up with Paul at the Three Taverns, which is 10 miles further north. We get a real sense of how this welcoming party impacted Paul personally – "On seeing them, Paul thanked God and took courage."

Well, Paul finally makes it to Rome. The Roman Christians make Paul feel welcome despite him being a prisoner. Based on Romans 16:3 it is possible that Paul's good friends Aquila and Priscilla are among those who welcome Paul to Rome. We know that after Corinth they found their way to Rome eventually. It is possible that in the last three years they had made it to Rome. We do not know that because they are never actually mentioned in this passage. But I like to think that it could possibly be the case. Paul's spirit, with all these people meeting and greeting him, must have soared – being treated with such respect and enthusiasm after everything he has been through these last few years. It is something he really needed.

READ Acts 28:16

The Roman commander officially hands Paul and his other prisoners over. He releases them to the custody of the imperial Praetorian Guard. His mission is complete. He has done his part and delivered the prisoners to Rome.

Paul is permitted to take lodging in the city and is placed under house arrest in the custody of a Roman soldier. So, what does that mean? Well, this is a little bit different from the house arrests of today. Paul does not have a whole lot of privacy. This house arrest involved being constantly monitored. Paul is in a house – not a prison or a dungeon – and he can do his writing and other things, but he is constantly being guarded 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. How long does this go on? For another two years, until his meeting with the emperor.

Over the next two years Paul writes what are known as “The Prison Epistles” from Rome. One of these is his letter to the Philippians. Listen to what Paul says... “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” (Philippians 1:12-13). So, for Paul this provides an opportunity to witness to a “captive” audience. He is the one who is captive, right? But now he has these guards there that have to watch him. So, now he can witness to them. This is probably how the Gospel of Jesus Christ spread through all the palace – through Paul’s interaction with these imperial guards. He probably became close friends with some of them. The rotation of the guards gives Paul a constant supply of people to witness to. So, Paul looks at his situation in Rome as a blessing.

I want you to think back to Paul’s missionary journeys. Do you remember where Paul traditionally, whenever he came to a new town, went first to preach the Gospel? He went into the Jewish synagogue. Well, obviously he is not free to do that here in Rome. He cannot just go into the local synagogue and preach while he is a prisoner in Rome. Instead, in essence they bring the synagogue to Paul! He invites the Jewish leaders to come visit him and they take him up on his offer.

READ Acts 28:17-22

Paul tells these Jewish leaders in Rome his story. He explains that he had done nothing unworthy of a Jew, but had been imprisoned “because of

the hope of Israel.” He is speaking of course about the Jewish Messiah, Jesus, who became human, was crucified and then resurrected from the dead. The Jews tell Paul that they have not heard anything about him one way or the other from the Jerusalem Jews. They ARE interested, however, in what Paul has to say. Good news for Paul. So, Paul invites them to come back and visit him again, and they do. Paul seizes upon this opportunity to present the Gospel to all of the Roman Jews.

READ Acts 28:23-24

As he had done many times before, Paul explains the Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah. Then one by one he shows how Jesus fulfilled them by His coming His life, His death and then eventually His resurrection. The reaction to Paul’s message is not surprising. Some of the Jews believe. However, many of the Jews will not be persuaded. This latter group prompts Paul to speak one final word of warning to his beloved Jewish brothers.

READ Acts 28:25-29

Quoting from Isaiah Chapter 6, Paul takes one parting shot at their indifference. He tells the Jews that from this day forward, salvation will be preached to the Gentiles because the Jews had refused to listen. How fitting that, in the last recorded speech by Paul in the Book of Acts, he is still trying his best to convince his Jewish brothers that their long-awaited Messiah has already come!

So, now we wrap up the book of Acts with these verses...

READ Acts 28:30-31

The end of the book of Acts. For two more years, while Paul is waiting for his case to be heard by the Roman Emperor Nero, he preaches the Gospel to the Jewish minority who had believed (or who will believe) and to an increasing number of Gentiles who are responding to his preaching.

I want you to notice the way the book of Acts ends. It is abrupt. It almost seems anti-climactic. Luke’s main concern is not to present a



complete life story of Paul or Peter or any of the others. That is not his purpose. He is telling the story of the spread of Christianity to this man Theophilus. Luke's main concern is to remind Theophilus and his future readers about the unstoppable word of God. No obstacle — not shipwrecks, not poisonous snakes, not the Roman authorities, not mobs of angry people — nothing was going to hinder the Gospel message from reaching the heart of the Roman Empire.

Let me give you the applications for Acts Chapter 28...

- The local residents of Malta built a fire on the beach for the shipwreck victims. That was a big deal. It is often the little things that we do for others that makes such a huge difference.
- Lessons learned from the natives on Malta. At first, when Paul was bitten by a viper, they thought he was a criminal deserving punishment. Later, when Paul survived, they viewed him as a god. In truth, Paul was neither a criminal nor a god. This shows that we must be cautious about relying on what the majority of people might think, whether it be good or bad. The majority does not always get it right, do they?
- God keeps His promises. He had assured Paul back in Chapter 23 that he must and would make it to Rome. He repeated this promise during the two weeks out at sea in Chapter 27. Finally, near the end of the book of Acts, HE DID make it!!
- No matter where we are, no matter the circumstances God has placed us in, we can serve others and serve the Lord. Just like Paul, we can do our best wherever we are to help others and to proclaim the Good News.
- God's desire is that all people come to salvation (2 Peter 3:9). But God does not force it on anybody. He does not beg us to come. It is an individual choice, one that we must all make for ourselves. How will you respond?
- As the book of Acts ends, Paul offers a word of warning and admonition to his unbelieving Jewish brothers. In just a few years

after Paul's message, 64 A.D, wholesale persecution of Christians (and some Jews) would begin. Then, in 70 A.D, the Jewish people of Judea would be slaughtered and Jerusalem would be destroyed. So, why mention all that? Because God's judgment was coming, and perhaps Paul sensed this. The reality is that, and this is what I will close with, NONE of us knows for certain how much time we have to get right with God.

## **EPILOGUE**

The book of Acts began with our Lord telling His eleven disciples, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Jesus then departed back to heaven and we are still looking forward to Him coming back to this day, to His return. The eleven went back into Jerusalem and waited. The Holy Spirit came (at Pentecost) and He gave them the power they needed to carry out Jesus's marching orders. Throughout the book of Acts we see that, despite increased persecution which sometimes included death (like Stephen, James and others); in spite of constant opposition (Paul and Peter had all kinds of opposition); and threats by powerful people – against all odds, the Gospel message spread like wildfire. What started out in Jerusalem with a handful of Jewish Christians spread to Judea and Samaria. So, they were obedient. But it did not stop there, did it? Then the Gospel made its way across to Asia and to Europe (Paul's missionary journeys). Eventually it reached Rome itself (that is what we saw in the last chapter of Acts). But then the book ends abruptly. The fact is that the book of Acts is still ongoing. We, the believers of the modern-day church of the Lord Jesus Christ, we get to be a part of the end of the book. You and I are living out the last act of Acts... "From Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to THE ENDS OF THE EARTH." That is where we come in. There is still plenty of work to be done right now, right where we are. We are writing the end to the book of Acts.