

Grace Church
Roanoke, Virginia

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Lesson #59

ACTS
The End Which Never Ends
Acts 28:1-31

We have now arrived at the end of the Book of Acts but it is not really the end; it is the beginning. The Book of Acts is God's inspired record of the first century church, but the last chapter of Acts is the beginning of uninspired church history. The Book of Acts is really the acts of the resurrected Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.

“The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when He was taken up, after He had by the Holy Spirit given orders to the apostles whom He had chosen” (Acts 1:1, 2).

Jesus Christ is still doing mighty things on earth through the Holy Spirit although bodily He is at the right hand of the Father. The Book of Acts is an unfinished book and introduces us to the whole record of the history of the church which continues to this day. The real thrust of the Book of Acts will never end until the second advent of Jesus Christ.

In Acts 27, we were given a cliff-hanging account of an exciting shipwreck as the Apostle Paul was on his way as a prisoner to Rome to appeal before Caesar. We left Paul and the passengers of the ship swimming to shore or clinging to planks as they abandoned ship. They were stranded and had no idea where they were geographically.

PAUL AND THE VIPER - Acts 28:1-6

Island (28:1)

“And when they had been brought safely through, then we found out that the island was called Malta.” -- The ship had wrecked on the island of Malta in the Mediterranean. The bay where they actually shipwrecked is referred to today as the Bay of St. Paul.

Inhabitants (28:2)

“And the natives showed us extraordinary kindness; for because of the rain that had set in and because of the cold, they kindled a fire and received us all.” -- Apparently, on the island of Malta the people were rather primitive or uncivilized compared to Greek and Roman standards. Yet, they were not naked savages. Whatever, they showed great kindness to those in the shipwreck. As this bedraggled group came ashore, they greeted them, made a fire and took care of their needs.

These natives were very superstitious and probably had no exposure to the gospel.

Perhaps this is the reason Paul used signs in the preaching of the gospel at Malta.

Incident with the Viper (28: 3-6)

“But when Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks and laid them on the fire, . . .” -- Paul, along with the others, was gathering up sticks to throw onto the fire. Notice, Paul did not think himself better than the others and he gladly picked up sticks. He did not say, “Why, I’m a man of the cloth. This work is beneath me!” No, he was just one with the many and he did his share in everything.

“. . . a viper came out because of the heat, and fastened on his hand.” -- Paul picked up a bundle of sticks and unknown to him a snake was in that bundle. The snake was inactive because it was hibernating. When the snake came near the fire, it warmed and awakened. When it came to life, this poisonous snake struck at Paul and its fangs sank so deep into Paul's body that it just dangled from Paul's hand.

“And when the natives saw the creature hanging from his hand, they began saying to one another, ‘Undoubtedly this man is a murderer, and though he has been saved from the sea, justice has not allowed him to live.’” -- While these natives had no exposure to the gospel of Christ, they were religious and had an understanding that sin in the universe will be judged by God or gods. They had this understanding because they were created in the image of God. They had a sense of guilt over sin and that wrong will be judged, although this was marred by sin. These natives wrongly concluded that Paul was a murderer and this snake bite merely proved that the gods had finally gotten even with Paul for his sins. They, because of their superstition, jumped to conclusions, but there was no justification for their thinking.

“However he shook the creature off into the fire and suffered no harm.” -- Paul shook off this viper and showed absolutely no symptoms of a snake bite. There was no redness or swelling or sickness. Obviously a miracle had occurred.

“But they were expecting that he was about to swell up or suddenly fall down dead. But after they waited a long time and had seen nothing unusual happen to him, they changed their minds and began to say that he was a god.” -- The superstitious natives recognized immediately that a miracle had taken place and they changed their minds and decided Paul was a god.

God planned it so this incident would occur and Paul would have a grand opportunity to witness for Christ to these natives. Nothing happens by accident, not even a snake bite. John Calvin said, “The viper certainly did not come out of the bundle of sticks by chance, but according to God's secret purpose; the Lord directed it to bite Paul because He saw it would be for the glory of the gospel.”

God gave a sign to these superstitious natives, for we know Paul had the special Apostolic sign-gifts of the first century. According to Mark 16:14-20, it was the Apostles who truly believed in the resurrected Christ who would be given special

sign-gifts such as tongues, healings, picking up of serpents and drinking poison. Acts 28:3-6 and Mark 16:17, 18 cannot be signs which accompany anyone who believes in Christ because the context will not permit it.

Snake handling among so-called radical Christians is quite often reported in this area of the country. These snake handlers get their supposed biblical authority from Mark 16 and Acts 28. They pride themselves in being able to handle timber rattlers. It is recorded quite frequently that some snake handler died because of being bitten by the snake.

A few years ago there was a story about Oscar Pelfry of Big Stone Gap, Virginia. Pelfry, who was 65 years old, stood before a congregation holding a pair of timber rattlesnakes. He did this as an act of worship in the Holiness Church of God in Jesus Name. He said, "I believe Jesus; oh Jesus, I believe, thank you Jesus; I believe" and then suddenly one of the rattlers bit him in the temple. He was taken home. He refused medical attention and died six hours later.

The reporters, after this incident, gathered a few of his friends together who were also snake handlers and asked them questions. One of these friends was a certain Mr. Mullins. Mullins said, "When the ecstasy of the Lord comes upon you and you take up serpents, you have no fear. You've got to believe this yourself. If you move too fast or too slow, sometimes you will get bit but if under the anointing power of God, the serpent won't hurt you." Then the reporter said, "Of course, God does not always provide His anointing power." Mullins himself lost his right hand in 1953 after he was bitten by a rattler, but he lived. Statistics show there may be as many as 75 snake bites a year as a result of snake handling by radicals. Nevertheless, the snake handlers faith remains unshaken. They argue that the deaths are simply God's way of showing how little faith men have, for if we have enough faith, God will not let the rattlers strike.

PAUL AND THE HEALING OF PUBLIUS' FATHER - Acts 28:7-10

Supernatural Healing (28:7, 8)

"Now in the neighborhood of that place were lands belonging to the leading man of the island named Publius, who welcomed us and entertained us courteously three days." -- It is quite likely that Publius, who welcomed them, was the head of the Roman government on Malta, and Julius, the centurion in charge of the crew and passengers on the ship, arranged a visit with him.

"And it came about that the father of Publius was lying in bed afflicted with recurrent fever and dysentery; and Paul went in to see him and after he had prayed, he laid his hands on him and healed him." -- This man was ill with something like the flu. Paul went in and prayed for and laid hands on him and he was instantaneously healed. A miracle of healing took place. Again Paul had the Apostolic sign-gifts which included the gift of healing.

While Paul had the sign-gifts of miracles and healings, he did not always use them. He

told Timothy to take a little wine for his stomach (1 Tim 5:23) and left Trophimus at Miletus sick (II Tim. 4:20).

Natural Healing (28:9, 10)

“And after this had happened, the rest of the people on the island who had diseases were coming to him and getting cured.” -- The word for the healing of Publius' father is supernatural, instantaneous healing, but in this verse it says people were bringing the sick of the island to Paul and he was “curing” them. This word means a gradual cure. It is similar to our English word therapeutic. This has caused some scholars to think that a unique combination of medical skill and divine healing were used by Paul in the healing of the sick. Perhaps Dr. Luke was deeply involved in the natural healing process while, at the same time, praying for God's providential healing. Dr. Luke was perhaps the very first medical missionary.

“And they also honored us with many marks of respect; and when we were setting sail they supplied us with all we needed.” -- When Paul and Luke left, the natives supplied the new ship with supplies out of deep appreciation for their ministry among them.

No doubt multiple thousands of people heard the gospel of Christ during that short stay on the island of Malta.

PAUL AND HIS TRIP TO ROME - Acts 28:11-16

Method of Travel (28:11-14)

“And at the end of three months we set sail on an Alexandrian ship which had winter at the island and which had the Twin Brothers for its figurehead.” -- Paul and Luke set sail on a totally pagan ship. On the front of the ship were two gods, Castor and Pollux, sons of Zeus. Paul and Luke were not total separationists because they sailed on a ship dedicated to a pagan deity.

“And after we put in at Syracuse, we stayed there for three days. And from there we sailed around and arrived at Rhegium, and a day later a south wind sprang up, and on the second day we came to Puteoli. There we found some brethren, and were invited to stay with them for seven days; and thus we came to Rome.” -- Almost everywhere in the Roman Empire there were brethren who exercised their gift of hospitality and took Paul and Luke into their homes.

Meeting with Other Christians (28:15)

“And the brethren, when they heard about us, came from there as far as the Market of Appius and Three Inns to meet us; and when Paul saw them, he thanked God and took courage.” -- Paul arrived on the outskirts of Rome and Christians came to meet him at the Market of Appius (40 miles from Rome) and Three Taverns (30 miles from Rome).

Notice the joy and encouragement Paul received when he met these Christian brethren, most of whom he had never met. Yet there was an immediate oneness between them. What a time this must have been. They prayed together; fellowshiped together and encouraged one another to greater dedication to Christ.

Three years earlier, Paul wrote the Book of Romans, but now at last he is coming to Rome. God is faithful, for He promised Paul he would get to Rome about four years before this time. Our timetable is not necessarily God's timetable.

Manner of Imprisonment (28:16)

“. . . Paul was allowed to stay by himself with the soldier who was guarding him.“ -- Paul was put under house arrest either chained to a guard or a guard was posted at his door. Every so many hours there would be a changing of the guard. Before long, the entire guard had heard the gospel of Christ from Paul. He had a captive audience and he took every opportunity to share Christ.

PAUL AND HIS GATHERING WITH THE JEWS - Acts 28:17-29

Contact with the Leaders (28:17-22)

“And it happened that after three days he called together those who were the leading men of the Jews, . . .” -- Wherever Paul went to preach Christ, he always went to the Jews first. “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (Rom. 1:16). He invited the local Jewish leaders to come and see him. Probably most came out of respect for Paul who was a well-known Jew and was probably a member of the Sanhedrin.

“. . . and when they had come together, he began saying to them, ‘Brethren, though I had nothing against our people, or the customs of our fathers, yet I was delivered prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans. And when they had examined me, they were willing to release me because there was no ground for putting me to death. But when the Jews objected, I was forced to appeal to Caesar; not that I had any accusation against my nation. For this reason therefore, I requested to see you and to speak to you, for I am wearing chains for the sake of the hope of Israel.’” -- Paul explained to them that he was innocent and the real reason he was in chains was because he believed in the hope of Israel. That is, he believed in the promised coming Messiah who had come in the person of Jesus Christ. Paul believed that Jesus Christ fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies about Messiah; that is, Christ did signs, died for sinners, and was resurrected from the dead just as the Old Testament predicted Messiah would do. Christ was the hope of Israel and yet the Jews rejected the Messiah; therefore they rejected Paul who also followed Christ.

Even today the issue is still the same for the Jews--the promise of Messiah. Is Messiah Jesus Christ or not? Jews today, after reexamining the issues, are turning to Christ as Messiah in larger numbers than before and we praise God for this.

“And they said to him, ‘We have neither received letters from Judea concerning you, nor have any of the brethren come here and reported or spoken anything bad about you. But we desire to hear from you what your views are; concerning this sect, it is known to us that it is spoken against everywhere.’” -- Their curiosity was aroused by this new Jewish sect called Christianity which was springing up everywhere. Also Christianity was evilly spoken of everywhere. True New Testament Christianity is always spoken against by the non-Christian world. This is true even today. If we go out with the same gospel message, with the same aggressive evangelism in the power of the Holy Spirit, we will be everywhere spoken against as were the early Christians. Identification with Christ always means alienation from the world. We cannot be true to Christ without being controversial.

“If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, ‘A slave is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they kept My word, they will keep yours also” (John 15:18-20).

Coming for Discussion (28:23-29)

“And when they set a day for him, they came to him at his lodging in large numbers; and he was explaining to them by solemnly testifying about the kingdom of God, and trying to persuade them concerning Jesus, from both the Law of Moses and from the Prophets, from morning until evening.” -- These Jews came to Paul’s apartment or rented home from morning until night as he explained to them about the kingdom of God (God’s sovereign rule over heaven and earth). He also spoke to them about Jesus Christ, the Messiah, the way of entrance into the kingdom of God in both its spiritual and earthly forms. Men acknowledge the Messiah as King and in so doing are saying He has the right to rule in the heart. Messiah is the key to God’s kingdom.

Notice that Paul explained or expounded the Scripture to these Jews. He went verse by verse through the various parts of the Old Testament which spoke of God’s kingdom and Messiah. Paul’s method was to expound the Scripture, testify concerning the kingdom and persuade men concerning Christ as Messiah. He sought to bring men to a point of decision and commitment to Christ.

“And some were being persuaded by the things spoken, but others would not believe.” -- Even the Apostle Paul could not persuade everyone to trust Christ, but he tried. Paul was bent on seeing men saved. “. . . I have become all things to all men, that I may by all means save some” (I Cor. 9:22b).

“And when they did not agree with one another, they began leaving after Paul had spoken one parting word, ‘The Holy Spirit rightly spoke through Isaiah the prophet to your fathers, saying, “GO TO THIS PEOPLE AND SAY, ‘YOU WILL KEEP ON HEARING, BUT WILL NOT UNDERSTAND; AND YOU WILL KEEP ON SEEING,

BUT WILL NOT PERCEIVE; FOR THE HEART OF THIS PEOPLE HAS BECOME DULL, AND WITH THEIR EARS THEY SCARCELY HEAR, AND THEY HAVE CLOSED THEIR EYES; LEST THEY SHOULD SEE WITH THEIR EYES, AND HEAR WITH THEIR EARS, AND UNDERSTAND WITH THEIR HEART AND TURN AGAIN, AND I SHOULD HEAL THEM.” -- Paul quoted from Isaiah 6:9,10 to show that the Bible predicted that the majority of the Jews would harden their hearts and close their minds to the truth of Messiah. The evidence is overwhelming that Jesus Christ is the Messiah of the Old Testament but the Jews rejected, because to accept Messiah meant they had to change their life styles and suffer for Messiah. Their comforts would be disturbed if they followed Messiah. They wanted tradition, wrong theology, ritual and whatever. To follow Christ meant change and they did not want to change. They had a comfortable pattern of life and they did not want it disturbed. They resented everything which would upset the so-called tranquility of their lives. Yet, to follow Christ demands change!

“Let it be known to you therefore, that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will also listen.” -- The Jews were hardened, so Paul turned to the Gentiles with the gospel of Christ. The reason that you and I (as Gentiles) are saved today is because the gospel was taken to the Gentiles, for the Jews turned from the truth and were bypassed as a nation.

This verse is a tremendous promise. As we take the gospel to the Gentiles, some hear and respond to Christ.

PAUL AND HIS MINISTRY IN ROME - Acts 28:30, 31

His Abode (28:30)

“And he stayed two full years in his own rented quarters, and was welcoming all who came to him, . . .” -- Paul dwelt two years in his own home or apartment at his own expense while he was awaiting trial. Two whole years he was confined to his home. This would seem like a “bummer” but God used this time for him to write Philippians, Colossians, Ephesians and Philemon. Paul's letters during this time are filled with rejoicing and complete submission to the sovereign purposes of God for his life.

“Now I want you to know, brethren, my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the Gospel” (Phil. 1:12).

“For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. But if I am to live on in the flesh, this will mean fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which to choose. But I am hard pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better; yet to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake” (Phil. 1:21-24).

“I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry,

both of having abundance and suffering need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me” (Phil. 4:12-14).

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say rejoice” (Phil. 4:4)!

"Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God” (Phil. 4:6).

His Activity (28:31)

“ . . . preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness, unhindered.” -- For two years Paul preached and taught about Christ and God's kingdom. He had an evangelistic home Bible class and a discipleship class for his converts. It was the greatest home seminary which ever existed.

Notice the very last word of the Book of Acts is unhindered. Paul was bound but the gospel was unhindered. For two thousand years the good news of Christ has been preached in this world. Many have tried to stop the progress of the gospel but it will go forth unhindered and it will be victorious (II Tim. 2:9).

PAUL AND HIS LAST DAYS

According to tradition, Paul appeared before Caesar (Nero) and was acquitted in about 63 A.D. Apparently he went back to the island of Crete, and may have visited Ephesus once more. It is also stated in church tradition that Paul finally reached Spain, for this was one of the main goals of his life. Some scholars even feel he may have visited Britain.

Then in 64 A.D., Rome burned and Nero, who started the fire, blamed it on the Christians. There was then a great persecution of Christians in the whole Roman Empire. Shortly after this Paul was taken again and imprisoned in a jail, isolated and lonely in a cold, dark cell. It was during this imprisonment that he wrote the Book of Second Timothy and was being made ready by God to meet the Lord Jesus Christ through death.

“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing” (II Tim. 4:7, 8).

And finally one day, according to tradition, Paul was led out of the jail and taken outside the walls of Rome. He knelt down and a sword flashed in the sun. His head was cut off and he went home to be with the Lord.

Paul was a tremendous man of God. What a life! What a man of passion for Christ! Paul's life should be a challenge to each one of us to live consistently for Jesus Christ in

the midst of the most severe hardships.

CONCLUSION

Paul was a great Christian but the Book of Acts is not just about Paul but it is all about Jesus Christ, the One who died for sinners, was resurrected from the dead and ascended to the right hand of God.

Do you know the resurrected Christ? He is Lord of all and one day all men will face Him. He will either be Savior or Judge. Receive Christ; believe He died for your sins; bow your will to Him as Lord so you will not face Him as Judge and be cast into everlasting misery. Trust Christ as your Savior so He may reward you with everlasting bliss in heaven.