

The Story That Never Ends

Scripture: Acts 28:17–31

Code: 1802

INTRODUCTION

This last section of Acts is the end of the first chapter of early church history. Throughout Acts the Holy Spirit has given us the first historical record of the early church. At the beginning of this book our Lord Jesus Christ said to the disciples, "Ye shall receive power, after the Holy Spirit is come upon you; and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth" (Acts 1:8). That is the theme of the book of Acts. The gospel began in Jerusalem, then spread throughout all Judea, Samaria, and finally to the uttermost part of the earth. By the end of Acts it spread to Rome.

At this point the record stops, but the story of the church continues throughout eternity. In that sense Acts is an unfinished book. In fact, it ends so abruptly that many have thought a chapter or paragraph was lost: "Paul dwelt two whole years in his own hired house, and received all that came in unto him, preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching those things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ, with all confidence, no man forbidding him" (Acts 28:30-31). It doesn't say what became of Paul at the end of the two years. It doesn't tell us about the growth of the church in Rome. But this incomplete ending is by design of the Holy Spirit because the church has no end. Only the record ceases to be written.

Although the record is incomplete, enough has been written to reveal the source of power for the church--the Holy Spirit. Enough has been written to reveal the pattern of blessing for the church--walking by the Spirit. Enough has been written to indicate what the church's approach to evangelism ought to be--declaring Jesus Christ. Enough has been written to warn of the perils to the church--sin, discipline, and judgment. Enough has been written to establish the priorities of the church--teaching the Word of God and reaching those who don't know Christ. And enough has been written elsewhere to see what the church is to be by example. Paul laid out the principles of the church in Ephesians, 1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus.

LESSON

In Acts 28:17-31 we will look at the end of Acts as the church spreads to Rome, where Paul finally arrived after many years of longing. Acts closes with Paul in chains in the midst of a tremendous mission field. His first approach at evangelism in this situation is recorded for us beginning in verse 17. It's fitting that the book of Acts should end with evangelism. Believers today are still continuing the world evangelism that began in Acts. And it is my prayer we continue that effort.

I want us to look first at the historical narrative and then highlight its emphasis on evangelism.

I. PAUL'S INTRODUCTION (vv. 17-20)

First Paul had to introduce himself to the people of Rome. Now that he had arrived, he wanted to have an impact on the total city. It's difficult to have an impact on over a million people, but Paul had a strategy.

A. Paul's Pattern Examined (v. 17a)

"It came to pass that, after three days, Paul called the chief of the Jews together."

That would have been more than one person. F.F. Bruce tells us "we have references in Roman

inscriptions to at least seven Jewish synagogues in Rome" (Commentary on the Book of Acts [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, pp. 63, 530). Each of those synagogues would have been represented by a chief man. They were most likely represented by Jewish people who had important responsibilities in the city. Some may have been wealthy trade merchants.

Paul's pattern, as always, was to go to the Jews first whenever he entered a city. That's because he would find an initial openness from them. Also if he went to the Gentiles first, he would have alienated himself from the Jews.

1. Paul's love for the Jews

Although Paul has been accused of anti-Semitism by many Jewish people throughout history, he held no such attitude. Although he had been maligned, persecuted, threatened, beaten, and abused mainly by Jewish religious leaders for several years before arriving in Rome, he felt no animosity toward them or the people. That he went to them first reveals his love for Israel. a) Romans 9:1-3-- Paul said, "I say the truth in Christ, I lie not, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh." Paul loved Israel so much that he would wish himself accursed if it would be to their benefit. b) Romans 10:1--Paul said, "My heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they might be saved." Paul's love for Israel was never daunted by all he endured at their hands.

2. The Jews' interest in Paul

Since Paul was a prisoner he couldn't go to the synagogues to speak to the people, so he asked the chief men to come to him, and they did. They had a deep interest in him since they certainly had heard something about him. He had become popular in the Roman world just as he had become unpopular in the Jewish world. He had disrupted every synagogue he had entered by winning some to Jesus Christ. The reports about his endeavors had certainly reached the Jewish population at Rome. They definitely would have been interested in what he had to say about the Messiah.

Acts 18:2 tells us the Emperor Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. Apparently, since Nero was now emperor, that edict was no longer in effect.

B. Paul's Imprisonment Explained (vv. 17b-20)

Paul had to explain a delicate matter. He had to prove he was innocent of the charges brought against him by the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem, yet at the same time not alienate his Jewish audience.

1. His innocence (vv. 17b-18)

a) Portrayed (v. 17b) "When they were come together, he said unto them, Men and brethren, though I have committed nothing against the people or customs of our fathers, yet was I delivered prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans." Paul had not violated Jewish law, and he had not injured Jewish people. He had done absolutely nothing; he was innocent of any crime. Although his imprisonment was caused by Jewish antagonism against him, that imprisonment did not reflect any anti-Semitic crime against the customs of the people, the Law of God, or God Himself. The Jewish leaders in Jerusalem had accused Paul of sedition, claiming he was a reactionary against the Roman government. They also accused him of sectarianism, claiming he was a leader in the sect of the Nazarenes and thus a heretic. And they accused him of sacrilege, saying he profaned the Temple and therefore blasphemed God. Acts 24:5-6 records those accusations: "We have found this man a pestilent fellow, and a mover of sedition among all the Jews throughout the world, and a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes, who also hath gone about to profane the temple." b) Proven (v. 18) "Who, when they [the Romans] had examined me, would have let me go, because there was no cause of death in me." Paul established at the outset that he was innocent in the eyes of the Roman government. So he was saying that the Jewish leaders were responsible for his imprisonment. Paul had been taken before the Roman governor Felix and found to be innocent (Acts 24). He was then taken before Festus, the next Roman governor, and found to be innocent (Acts 25:1-12). He was

then brought by Festus before King Agrippa and again found to be innocent (Acts 25:13[en]26:32). Even a hearing before the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem proved his innocence because the Pharisees and Sadducees were divided over his guilt or innocence (Acts 22:30[en]23:10). Despite his innocence, Paul was a prisoner in Rome. He didn't become one as a result of his guilt, but because the Romans were being blackmailed by the Jewish leaders. If the Romans didn't punish him, the leaders were likely to lead an insurrection against Rome. That was something Festus wished to avoid (Acts 24:9), so he succumbed to the pressure of the Jewish leaders and kept Paul a prisoner.

2. His appeal (v. 19a)

"But when the Jews spoke against it, I was constrained to appeal unto Caesar."

Although Paul was innocent, the Jewish leaders kept up the pressure to the point that his only escape was to appeal to Caesar in the hopes of receiving a fair trial. Since he was a Roman citizen, he had the right to appeal his case to Rome. That led to his being transported to Rome.

3. His love (v. 19b)

"Not that I had anything to accuse my nation of."

Since he had revealed that the Jewish leaders were responsible for his imprisonment, Paul was quick to point out that he was just defending himself against unfair accusations, and that in no way was he condemning or attacking the Jewish people or nation. He was not a traitor to the cause of Judaism. He remained Jewish in nationality and interest. He maintained his special love for the people. He held no bitterness toward Israel. He was simply defending himself.

4. His reasoning (v. 20)

"For this cause, therefore, have I called for you, to see you, and to speak with you, because for the hope of Israel I am bound with this chain."

Here Paul gave the reason for the antagonism against him: the hope of Israel. Who is the hope of Israel? The Messiah. Paul's trouble was the result of preaching that Jesus was the Messiah, and that He rose from the dead and provides a resurrection for all who believe in Him. That was the real issue. For that reason he was in chains.

The Hope of Israel

1. Paul's testimony before the Sanhedrin

Acts 23:6 says, "When Paul perceived that the one part were Sadducees, and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, Men and brethren, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee; of the hope and resurrection of the dead I am called in question." The hope of Israel relates to the Messiah and the resurrection. The Jewish people knew that God had promised a coming Messiah, and that He would usher in a glorious kingdom. For those who had already died to share in that kingdom, there would have to be a resurrection. a) Isaiah 26:19--The prophet Isaiah said, "Thy dead men shall live, together with my dead body shall they arise. Awake and sing, ye that dwell in dust; for thy dew is like the dew of the herbs, and the earth shall cast out the dead." b) Job 19:26--Job said, "Though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God." c) Daniel 12:2--"Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt."

2. Paul's testimony before Felix

In Acts 24:15 Paul says, "[I] have hope toward God, which they themselves [the Jewish leaders] also allow, that there shall be a resurrection of the dead."

3. Paul's testimony before Agrippa

In Acts 26:6-8 he says "Now I stand and am judged for the hope of the promise made of God unto our fathers, unto which promise our twelve tribes, earnestly serving God day and night, hope to come. For which hope's sake, King Agrippa, I am accused by the Jews. Why should it be thought a thing incredible with you, that God should raise the dead?"

The hope of Israel is that there will be a resurrection of the dead.

So Paul said that he was in chains because he had been declaring that the Messiah had arrived and had risen from the dead, thus providing for the resurrection of the dead. I imagine that as he said, "I am bound with this chain" (Acts 28:20, he probably held up the chain so they could see it. Paul constantly referred his chains. In Ephesians 6:20 he says, "I am an ambassador in bonds." In 2 Timothy 1:16 he says, "The Lord give mercy unto the house of Onesiphorus, for he often refreshed me, and was not ashamed of my chain."

II. THE JEWISH LEADERS' INTEREST (vv. 21-22)

"They said unto him, We neither received letters out of Judaea concerning thee, neither any of the brethren that came showed or spoke any harm of thee. But we desire to hear of thee what thou thinkest; for as concerning this sect [Christianity], we know that everywhere it is spoken against." The Jewish leaders in Rome displayed a very diplomatic attitude. They denied any knowledge of Paul's case, and they were eager to hear what he had to say about Christianity, about which they had heard only negative things.

A. No Report

Amazingly enough, they had received no word from Judea about Paul. The ship Paul arrived on may have been the most recent ship to come from Judea to Rome. It had left later than it should have, and at a time that was becoming dangerous for ships to sail the Mediterranean (Acts 27:9). When the Roman government in Judea determined to send Paul to Rome, it was only a matter of days before he was on a ship. So it is likely that Paul was on the first ship that had sailed from Judea to Rome since his trial before Agrippa.

B. No Accusation

Another reason that the Jewish leaders in Rome had no report about Paul is that apparently the Sanhedrin was reluctant to pursue its case to Rome. They knew they didn't have a case. So far they had been unsuccessful in presenting it before the provincial rulers, and they may have been fearful of looking bad to Caesar. The Roman government looked harshly on anyone who prosecuted a case without strong evidence. It would have been difficult to prosecute Paul, a Roman citizen, in Rome when they didn't have a case. There also would have been favorable information about Paul from Festus and Felix. So it is possible they were satisfied in having Paul removed out of Judea, and therefore saw no need to send anyone to inform the Roman Jews.

III. PAUL'S INVITATION (vv. 23-24)

Having seen their openness and interest, Paul established a time to make his presentation. All the Jewish leaders gathered to hear him speak.

A. The Content of Paul's Message (v. 23)

"When they had appointed him a day, there came many to him into his lodging, to whom he expounded and testified the kingdom of God, persuading them concerning Jesus, both out of the law of Moses, and out of the prophets, from morning to evening."

The general meaning of the phrase "the kingdom of God" is the rule of God in the universe. Paul focused on persuading the leaders that Jesus is the king of the kingdom--the Messiah. And he used the Old Testament law and prophets as his proof.

Paul used that approach throughout the book of Acts. He labored to prove the gospel of Jesus Christ as the true and necessary fulfillment of Israel's Scripture--of Old Testament history, typology, and prophecy. I'm convinced Paul didn't preach a sermon, but that he engaged in a dialogue with the Jewish leaders.

B. The Response to Paul's Message (v. 24)

"Some believed the things that were spoken, and some believed not."

That is the typical response to the preaching of the gospel. Some believe, and some don't. Both Greek verbs are in the imperfect tense, implying continuous, progressive action. The simplicity of

salvation is that it is reduced to this: a person either believes in Christ or he doesn't. It is significant that some didn't believe. The gospel had been continually offered to Israel. However rejection was the primary response. Christ never received national acceptance--only a small remnant believed.

IV. THE GOSPEL'S INVERSION (vv. 25-29)

An inversion is a reversal. The gospel went to the Jew first (Rom. 1:16), but we see that priority reversed in the following verses. For the fourth time in Scripture the Spirit of God quotes a prophecy first recorded in Isaiah 6:9-10. Isaiah spoke those words at a time when Israel was in sin. Our Lord Jesus quoted him in Matthew 13:14-15 to pronounce judgment on Israel. John also quoted the same passage (John 12:40). Finally Paul quoted them in Acts 28:25-27.

A. God's Plan for Israel (vv. 25-27)

"When they agreed not among themselves, they departed, after Paul had spoken one word, Well spoke the Holy Spirit by Isaiah, the prophet, unto our fathers, saying, Go unto this people, and say, Hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing ye shall see, and not perceive; for the heart of this people is become obtuse, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes have they closed; lest they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them."

What began as a willful act on the part of Israel became God's sovereign plan. Israel rejected God, becoming blind and deaf in their spiritual understanding. Consequently they decided their own destiny, as God sealed their ears, eyes, and minds.

1. Israel's willful rejection

Jesus came into the world born of a virgin. As God incarnate He lived in humility among men and women in Nazareth for thirty relatively obscure years. After that He announced to Israel that He was God, the Messiah, the living Christ, the living water, the bread of life, the light of the world, the good shepherd, the resurrection and the life--all titles attributed to Him in John's gospel. He substantiated all those claims by miracles, signs, matchless words, and unsurpassed love.

What was the response of Israel? They doubted Him, denied Him, rejected Him, and ultimately executed Him. We see Jesus' final call to Israel in John 12:35-40: "Jesus said unto them, Yet a little while is the light with you. Walk while ye have the light, lest darkness come upon you; for he that walketh in darkness knoweth not where he goeth. While ye have light, believe in the light, that ye may be the sons of light. These things spoke Jesus, and departed, and did hide himself from them. But though he had done so many miracles before them, yet they believed not on him; that the saying of Isaiah, the prophet, might be fulfilled, which he spoke, Lord, who hath believed our report? And to whom hath the arm of the Lord been revealed? Therefore, they could not believe, because that Isaiah said again, He hath blinded their eyes, and hardened their heart; that they should not see with their eyes, nor understand with their heart, and be converted, and I should heal them." What began as willful blindness turned into sovereign blindness. He who will not believe may find one day that he cannot believe.

2. Israel's eventual restoration

Nevertheless God is not through with Israel. He did abandon Israel when they abandoned Christ, but not permanently. Israel's unbelief caused God to set the nation aside temporarily. Romans 9:17-18 says, "The Scripture saith unto Pharaoh, Even for this same purpose have I raised thee up, that I might show my power in thee, and that my name might be declared throughout all the earth. Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth." That is God's sovereign choice: He will save whom He will save, and He will gain glory from whom He will gain glory.

a) Grafting in the Gentiles For now God has chosen to go to the Gentiles: "I will call them my people, who were not my people; and her beloved, who was not beloved" (Rom. 9:25). Here God indicates

that the Gentiles would take Israel's place. Then Paul said, "The Gentiles, who followed not after righteousness, have attained to righteousness, even the righteousness which is of faith; but Israel, who followed after the law of righteousness, hath not attained to the law of righteousness" (vv. 30-31). In Romans 11 the natural branches represent Israel, the wild olive branches represent the Gentiles, and the trunk is the blessing of God. Paul says, "If some of the branches be broken off, and thou, being a wild olive tree, were grafted in among them ... boast not against the branches. But if thou boast, thou bearest not the root, but the root thee. Thou wilt say, then, The branches were broken off, that I might be grafted in. Well, because of unbelief they were broken off, and thou standest by faith. Be not high-minded, but fear; for if God spared not the natural branches, take heed lest he also spare not thee. Behold, therefore, the goodness and severity of God: on them who fell, severity; but toward thee, goodness, if thou continue in his goodness; otherwise thou also shalt be cut off" (vv. 17-22). b) Regrafting in Israel In verse 23 Paul says, "They also, if they abide not still in unbelief, shall be grafted in." Israel will be regrafted in if they believe. Paul continues, "For God is able to graft them in again. For if thou wert cut out of the olive tree which is wild by nature, and wert grafted contrary to nature into a good olive tree, how much more shall these, who are the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree.... Blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles be come in" (vv. 23-25). All Israel will be saved (v. 26); God will graft them in again. God is not ultimately through with Israel because that would break His eternal covenant with them. But for the time being, God has set Israel aside and is giving Gentiles the opportunity to come to Him.

B. God's Plan for the Gentiles (vv. 28-29)

"Be it known, therefore, unto you, that the salvation of God is sent unto the Gentiles, and that they will hear it. And when he had said these words, the Jews departed and had great disputing among themselves."

The book of Acts chronicles how God's Word went to the Gentiles (9:15; 11:18; 13:46-47; 14:27; 15:14-18; 18:6). Nevertheless He will one day restore Israel.

V. THE STORY'S INCOMPLETION (vv. 30-31)

"Paul dwelt two whole years in his own hired house, and received all that came in unto him, preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching those things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ, with all confidence, no man forbidding him."

Paul had absolute liberty. For two years he proclaimed Christ under the complacent eye of the Roman authority. He preached about the kingdom and about the Lord Jesus Christ, the promised Messiah. What Paul did after that time is left unrecorded in Scripture in narrative form.

Why Was Paul a Prisoner for Two Years?

Since Paul was innocent, why did he have to remain under house arrest for two years? It's possible that the records about him sent from the Roman governor in Judea were lost in the shipwreck. Sending back to Judea to get copies and having them returned would take some time. In addition, Roman law required the accusers or those prosecuting the case to be present in Rome to accuse the prisoner. I have serious doubts that any of the Jewish leaders would have come to Rome to prosecute him. It is likely that there was an eighteen or twenty-four month statutory period in which a case had to be prosecuted. If at the end of that time the prosecution failed to state its case, the prisoner would be released. It is my conviction that at the end of those two years Paul was released. From church tradition we learn that Paul then ministered for some time before he was imprisoned a second time in Rome, and then beheaded.

For two years Paul was free to minister in Rome while a prisoner. In those two years he led many people to Christ. He wrote epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, to the Ephesians and the Philippians. Many who served him could come and go. He told the Colossians that Aristarchus, Luke,

Mark, Jesus Justus, Epaphras, and Demas were with him (4:10-14). He told the Philippians about his blessings and how the gospel was spreading--his bonds being manifest throughout the palace (1:12-14). In Philippians 4:22 he says, "All the saints greet you, chiefly they that are of Caesar's household."

CONCLUSION

What does Acts 28:17-31 teach us about Paul's method of evangelism?

A. Where Paul Preached

Paul preached the gospel anywhere. He was a prisoner in chains (vv. 16, 20). He was restricted to his own hired house (vv. 23, 30). Yet he was always preaching (v. 31). Paul knew no restriction to his pulpit. If he was in a prison, he preached there. If he was in a marketplace, he preached there. If he was in a synagogue, he preached there. It didn't matter where he was. Evangelism can occur anywhere.

B. How Paul Preached

1. Lovingly

Acts 28:17-20 shows He was very sensitive and conciliatory to the Roman Jewish leaders. He told them he didn't have any accusation against the nation of Israel.

2. Biblically

Paul expounded and testified about the kingdom of God as recorded in the law of Moses and the prophets (v. 23). He wasn't giving his opinion; he showed how biblical truth about the Messiah was fulfilled in the Lord Jesus Christ.

3. Doctrinally

He taught the great doctrines about the kingdom and the Lord Jesus (vv. 23, 31).

C. When Paul Preached

Paul preached promptly (v. 17)--he gathered an audience after he was in Rome for only three days. He preached tirelessly (v. 23)-- he preached from morning to evening. He preached incessantly (vv. 30-31)--for two whole years. He preached boldly (v. 31)--with all confidence.

D. To Whom Paul Preached

Paul preached both to Jews (v. 17) and Gentiles (v. 28). He was willing to speak to anyone.

E. What Paul Preached

Paul attempted to persuade people about Christ (v. 23). He wanted them to know everything about Him (v. 31).

Where are we to preach? Wherever we are. How are we to preach? Lovingly, biblically, and doctrinally. When are we to preach? Promptly, tirelessly, incessantly, and boldly. To whom are we to preach? Jew or Gentile--to anyone. What are we to preach? Jesus Christ. What will results be? Verse 24 tells us that some will believe and some won't. May you follow Paul's example and preach the truth to whomever will listen, leaving the results to God.

Focusing on the Facts

1. In what ways has enough been written in Acts for the benefit of the church?
2. Whom did Paul first ask to meet with him after he arrived in Rome (Acts 28:17)?
3. Why did Paul go to the Jews first whenever he entered a city for the first time?
4. What did Paul's imprisonment not reflect concerning the Jewish people (Acts 28:17)?
5. What did the Jewish leaders from Jerusalem accuse Paul of (Acts 24:5- 6)?
6. What did the Roman leaders in Judea conclude about Paul (Acts 28:18)?
7. Why did Paul remain a prisoner and get sent to Rome (Acts 28:19)?
8. What was the real issue that antagonized the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem (Acts 28:20)?
9. What is the hope of Israel?
10. Why might the Jewish leaders in Rome not have received a report about Paul?

11. Why might the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem have decided not to pursue Paul's case to Rome?
12. What was the content of Paul's message to the Roman Jewish leaders (Acts 28:23)?
13. How did those leaders respond (Acts 28:24)?
14. What was the conclusion to Israel's willful rejection of God (Acts 28:25-27)?
15. Using the imagery of an olive tree, how did God include the Gentiles in His plan (Rom. 11:17-22)?
16. Using the same imagery, what will become of Israel (Rom. 11:23-26)?
17. Why did Paul remain a prisoner in Rome for two years?
18. What did Paul do during those two years (Acts 28:30-31)?
19. What does Acts 28:17-31 illustrate about Paul's method of evangelism?

Pondering the Principles

1. Review the introductory section that discusses what Acts teaches about the church (p. 1). Implement the following study for the next couple of weeks. Read through the book of Acts. Record each incident of the Holy Spirit's being referred to as the source of power for the church, of walking in the Spirit as the pattern of blessing for the church, and of declaring Jesus Christ as the church's approach to evangelism. Record every incident of warning to the church and note what form that warning takes. Record every occasion where the priority of the church is clearly delineated. What are you doing within your church to help the the worldwide church of God be what God wants it to be? What do you need to do? Begin today to fulfill your role within God's eternal program.
2. Review Paul's method of evangelism (see pp. 10-11). Where can you proclaim Christ? Make a list of all the different places you will be in the next month. How should you proclaim the gospel? If you feel less than adequate in any of those areas, sign up for some evangelism seminars at your church or one nearby, or go witnessing with a mature Christian friend. When should you proclaim Christ? Keep in mind it never mattered to Paul what his circumstances were. To whom should you talk about Christ? Make a list of people you know who aren't saved. If you haven't already done so, begin to talk to them of your faith in Christ and the wonders of salvation in Him.

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