

Acts 28:16-31

28:16. Acts 28:16 represents the last of the “we” sections in the book. By this time, Paul’s credibility and integrity were so well established with Julius that he likely convinced Roman officials to keep him out of prison, allowing him to live privately with a good bit of freedom. Far from being a flight risk, Paul had pushed to come to Rome. Though he had something of an earlier reputation of escaping from cities at night, that would not likely be a problem at Rome.

Acts 23:11 had been fulfilled. Paul was at Rome and, for the moment, at liberty to do and say what he wished. Though the text does not tell us so, perhaps we can assume that Luke and Aristarchus stayed with Paul in Rome with Epaphras, John Mark, Demas, Timothy, and others coming and going over the next two years.

C. Jesus and the Jews (vv. 17–24)

SUPPORTING IDEA: *When God has identified a plan for ministry, we stay with it despite chains, guards, or shipwreck.*

28:17–20. Right up to the last, Paul never surrendered the pattern—first the synagogue, then the streets. Now he had considerably more “clout” and, rather than slipping into a synagogue as a guest, called the Jewish leaders of Rome together. He presented his case with special focus on the reason for his imprisonment found at the end of verse 20: **It is because of the hope of Israel that I am bound with this chain** (23:6; 24:21; 26:6–8). Note, too, that Paul was under house arrest and, therefore, unable to meet with the Jews in some place of their choosing.

The central theme of this first encounter with the Jews focused on Paul’s innocence. Luke summarizes the trial narratives in just a few words, though Paul may have carried out this lengthy explanation far beyond the boundaries of what we find in the text. We learn something new in verse 19. Not only were the charges against Paul groundless, but Paul had no counter charges to bring against the Jews. In this “clean slate” atmosphere he wanted to discuss with the Roman Jewish leaders his status as a prisoner and the hope of the resurrection.

Paul had no martyr complex; he had not come to Rome to die. From everything we read in these last chapters of Acts, he expected release and perhaps a long ministry in Rome and even points west. Everything continued to center on **the hope of Israel** which, as Toussaint says, “was more than a resurrection; it meant fulfillment of the Old Testament promises to Israel (cf. 26:6–7). Paul firmly believed Jesus is the Messiah of Israel who will return some day and establish Himself as the King of Israel and Lord of the Nations (cf. 1:6)” (Toussaint, 430).

28:21–22. We need to remember that the Jews had been expelled from Rome approximately ten years earlier (a.d. 50) and only began returning about a.d. 54. Their lack of communication with the mother country and general fuzziness regarding Christianity can be accounted for, to some extent, by their own insecurity in the city of Rome. Nevertheless, it is somewhat surprising that they didn’t show greater awareness of events and issues surrounding Paul’s appearance in Rome. Perhaps they knew more than they felt comfortable saying in light of their shaky status in the city.

To Romans, as we know by now, Christianity was just another Jewish sect, so they used that term in responding to Paul. The word **sect** is *hairesis* from which our word *heresy* derives.

Keep in mind, too, that Paul’s ship was among the first to arrive after winter, so Jews in Jerusalem and Caesarea had had little chance to communicate with their counterparts in Rome since this whole trial sequence began during the riot at the temple in chapter 21.

28:23–24. A large group came to visit Paul and stayed all day. He **declared to them the kingdom of God and tried to convince them about Jesus from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets**. Perhaps we could find a model for these remarks in Paul’s address at the synagogue in Pisidia in Antioch (13:17–41), to say nothing of the epistle to the Romans itself. Paul preached Jesus from the Old Testament. His view of the kingdom dealt with the origin, death, resurrection, and coming reign of the Lord.

The result? We’ve seen it before, and so had he. **Some were convinced by what he said, but others would not believe**. Perhaps the former group was only convinced of Paul’s innocence, but more likely they actually accepted the gospel and became Christians though Luke does not precisely tell us that. In either case, a divided synagogue following proclamation of the gospel has become a staple in Acts.

D. The Gospel to the Gentiles (vv. 25–31)

SUPPORTING IDEA: *When God has called us to a distinctive role, such as Paul’s mission to the Gentiles, we should waste no time getting right to the task wherever he sends us.*

28:25. The wording of the verse is important. Luke seems to want us to understand that though this argument continued, no one actually got up to leave until Paul began to quote Isaiah 6:9–10. In doing so Paul affirmed again the inspiration of the Old Testament text by the Holy Spirit (1:16; 4:25). His reference to **my own people** in verse 19 now changed to **your forefathers** as he began to distance himself from these unbelieving Jews. This quotation from Isaiah 6 had been used by Jesus (Luke 8:10; Matt. 13:13–15; Mark 4:12) and Paul had written it in Romans 11:8.

28:26–27. Jesus had employed this text to explain to the disciples why he spoke in parables. Here Paul used it to demonstrate Israel’s stubbornness and their unwillingness to understand how God’s providence brought redemption. This warning not only applies to Israel as a nation but to individuals then and now. As Marshall puts it:

God’s Word brings the diagnosis of sin, which is painful to hear and accept, but at the same time it wounds in order to heal. Once a person deliberately refuses the Word, there comes a point when he is deprived of the capacity to receive it. It is a stern warning to those who trifle with the gospel (Marshall, 425).

28:28. Here again we see the overarching plan—the gospel to the Gentiles. Remember, each time we have seen this, it has not been a permanent turning away from the nation of Israel, but a movement from Jews in a given city to Gentiles in that same place (13:46; 18:6). It seems clear that no national return to Christ occurred. Though Paul prayed and hoped for that, he would not see it in his day nor in any day until the second coming of the Messiah. Some versions include a verse 29, but the niv correctly omits it in view of insufficient manuscript evidence.

28:30. Obviously Rome was in no hurry to deal with this trial, so Paul, using his own resources, ministered to **all who came to see him**. During this time Paul wrote four epistles, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. Among those who visited him were Tychicus, Onesimus, and Ephaphroditus in addition to those we mentioned earlier. From the Prison Epistles we learn that Paul expected to stand trial (27:24) and expected to be released. In Longenecker’s chronology he dates a release about a.d. 63 and says,

Accepting the Pastoral Epistles as genuine, we may believe that after Paul’s release from this Roman imprisonment he continued his evangelistic work in the eastern portion of the empire (at least in lands surrounding the Aegean Sea)—perhaps even fulfilling his long cherished desire to visit

Spain (Rom. 15:23–24; cf. 1 Clement 5). And since 2 Timothy 4:16–18 speaks of an approaching second trial and a tone of resignation, we may conclude that Paul was rearrested about 67 and, according to tradition, beheaded at Rome by order of the Emperor Nero (Longenecker, 572).

Luke did not write Paul's biography. He wrote a record of the early church's expansion. Luke obviously finished his book before Paul's release, or he would have described the release and the continued expansion of the church; so we date the writing of Acts somewhere around 63, probably just prior to Paul's release. The Roman statute of limitations on accusations would have run out in eighteen months, and Luke might very well have expected Theophilus to pick up on that implication.

Not everyone accepts this early dating of the Book of Acts. Some suggest Luke assumed the knowledge in the Christian community of what happened to Paul and therefore didn't include it in his book. Some even argue that Luke wrote a third volume to complement and conclude Luke and Acts.

28:31. Luke ends the book on a ringing note of victory. During these two years Paul boldly **preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ** and he did so *akolutos*, **without hindrance**.

Whatever the conclusion about dating Luke's writing, he surely wants us to grasp the reality that God's message, the gospel of Jesus Christ, will proceed unhindered throughout the world regardless of what happens to courageous messengers.

MAIN IDEA REVIEW: *Along with Paul, Christians have victory over sin and the world both in life and in death.*

III. Conclusion

An Unfinished Story

Music lovers the world over are familiar with the famous "Unfinished Symphony" (Symphony No. 8 in B Minor) composed by Franz Schubert. The abrupt ending of this piece of music has made it world famous. Luke has also given us an unfinished story, but from all evidence, that is precisely what he intended. We can only speculate about a third volume, but he clearly wrote at a time when further information about Paul was unavailable or, if for some reason he did know more, he chose not to include it.

In his typical style, much in the way he ended his Gospel, Luke emphasizes the positive and healthy forward movement of the gospel and the message of the kingdom of God. Rome may bind the preacher, but the message goes on. That is the precise message of Acts. We may only have twenty-eight chapters here, but one could argue that each year in the life of the church another chapter is added. If Luke were still writing, he might describe your church or mine, or he might write about present missionary activity in Africa or Latin America. No, Acts is not an unfinished story. It finishes precisely where the author intended to end and trumpets the victory of Christ and his message right at the close of the book. In the final analysis, Christ, not Paul, is the hero of Acts.

Principles

- Christians have victory over sin and the world in life and in death.
- Kingdom citizens owe allegiance to the King—only then to this world.
- The message of the gospel is not bound by the fate of the messengers.
- The true Christian servant is never off duty.

Applications

- Expect to find Christians wherever you go; followers of “The Way” form a global community.
- Encourage and support other Christians, especially those who find themselves in some kind of difficulty.
- Be bold and stand firm despite the opposition.
- Practice faithfulness in God’s service no matter how difficult that may be at times.

IV. Life Application

When I Consider How My Light Is Spent

John Milton (1674) was an English poet and the composer of the great epic *Paradise Lost*. His sequel, *Paradise Regained*, written four years later, depicts Christ overcoming Satan’s temptations. Milton was a Puritan who studied the Bible faithfully and based much of his writing on its very words. From 1640 to 1660, Milton supported the Puritan movement in England, believing the Church of England corrupt and arguing that bishops should be deprived of power. In 1652 John Milton lost his sight and three years later wrote “On His Blindness.” Here is the entirety of that poetic work:

When I consider how my light is spent
Ere half my days in this dark world and wide,
And that one talent which is death to hide
Lodged with me useless, though my soul more bent
To serve therewith my Maker, and present
My true account, lest He returning chide,
“Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?”
I fondly ask. But Patience, to prevent
That murmur, soon replies, God doth not need
Either man’s work or his own gifts. Who best
Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. His state
Is kingly: thousands at his bidding speed,
And post o’er land and ocean without rest;
They also serve who only stand and wait.
(Williams, 106–107)

Yes, they also serve who only stand and wait, but that is not the central message of this sonnet. It focuses clearly on faithfulness despite one’s surroundings and circumstances, and that is precisely what we see from Paul.

Certainly, it’s difficult for us to identify with beatings and imprisonments, though Christians in every age have endured these. In more modern settings however, we might struggle with raising godly children in a single-parent household, pastoring a church which seems to rest lazily in a no-growth mode, or struggling with the frailties and disabling diseases of age. All these and more fit well into the pattern, if not the experience, of Paul’s life and ministry. Perhaps his magnificent testimony from Miletus can serve as our ringing connection with this book: **However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the gospel of God’s grace** (Acts 20:24).

V. Prayer

God, please allow us to finish our lives on earth with a solid allegiance to your Word and a willingness to serve you despite the difficulties and struggles all around us.

VI. Deeper Discoveries

C. Rome (v. 16)

Along the Appian Way, just north of Aricia, Paul would have caught his first glimpse of Rome. As Coneybeare and Howson describe it,

St. Paul would see a vast city, covering the Campagna, and almost continuously connected by its suburbs with the villas on the hill where he stood, and with the bright towns which clustered on the sides of the mountains opposite. Over all the intermediate space were the houses and gardens, through which aqueducts and roads might be traced in converging lines towards the confused mass of edifices which formed the city of Rome. Here no conspicuous building, elevated above the rest, attracted the eye or the imagination. Ancient Rome had neither cupola nor campanile.... It was a widespread aggregate of buildings, which, though separated by narrow streets and open squares, appeared, when seen from near Aricia, blended into one indiscriminate mass: for distance concealed the contrasts which divided the crowded habitations of the poor, and the dark haunts of filth and misery, from the theaters and colonnades, the baths, the temples and palaces with gilded roofs, flashing back the sun (Coneybeare, 732).

We are told "Rome was not built in a day," a vast understatement. Settlements began to form the original town shortly after 600 b.c., but Rome did not become a large, heavily populated city until some 200 years later. Within a hundred years after that, the squalor of which Conneybeare and Howson wrote became a characteristic feature. Experts believe that in time one-fifth of the population of Rome became Christian; but after ten generations of persecution, the city killed and buried well over a million followers of "The Way." In a.d. 64, the year after Paul was freed, parts of Rome were destroyed by fire for which history has made Nero responsible. In any case, the Scripture ends with numerous proclamations against the vile behavior of Rome and symbolic condemnations of its punishment.

D. How Many Imprisonments?

Perhaps it began with Eusebius, but tradition claims that Paul was released after his first defense and enjoyed another two or three years of ministry, quite possibly roaming again over Asia Minor, and this time heading west to Spain. This viewpoint rests largely on material in the Pastoral Epistles (1 and 2 Tim.; Titus) which cannot be fitted into the information we have in Acts. Polhill says:

It is thus highly likely that the personal events related in the Pastorals date from a period after Paul's first Roman confinement and are thus themselves testimony to Paul's release and subsequent ministry. In this view Paul would have arrived in Rome sometime in 59 or 60 and been released in 61 or 62. His return to Rome, second imprisonment, and martyrdom would have taken place under the Neronian persecution of the Roman Christians in a.d. 64 or 65. According to early tradition, Paul was martyred under Nero, being taken about a mile outside the city walls along the Ostian Way and beheaded (Polhill, 548).

Marshall is not so sure, but Polhill's explanation is accepted by many evangelical scholars and Bible students. Indeed, Ramsay says essentially the same thing, adding:

At his second trial the veil that hides his fate is raised for the moment. On that occasion the circumstances were very different from his first trial. His confinement was more rigorous, for Onesiphorus had to take much trouble before obtaining an interview with the prisoner (2 Tim. 1:17): "He fared ill as far as bonds, like a criminal" (2:19). He had no hope of acquittal: he recognized that he was "already being poured forth as an offering, and the time of his departure was come." The gloom and hopelessness of the situation damped and dismayed all his friends: at his first hearing "all forsook" him; yet for the time he "was delivered out of the mouth of the lion." In every respect the situation thus indicated is the opposite of the circumstances described on the first trial (Ramsay, 360).

Assuming that pattern is correct, Paul could well have written 1 Timothy and Titus during his period of release (approximately from a.d. 63–66, and 2 Timothy from the Mamertine prison just prior to his death in a.d. 67.

VII. Teaching Outline

A. Introduction

1. Lead Story: Island of the Barbarians
2. Context: We have come to the end. Everything Luke has written up to this point has prepared us for Paul's arrival at Rome. Yes, we are surprised by the ending of the book, and the commentary speaks briefly to that; but Paul's witness in Rome was clearly established, and Luke ends the book on a note of victory.
3. Transition: In Acts 28 we'll find people encouraging one another again, highlighted in the steadfast and resolute determination of Paul to boldly proclaim the name of Jesus in Rome.

B. Commentary

1. Miracles on Malta (vv. 1–10)
 - a. Paul and the snake (vv. 1–6)
 - b. People and their sickness (vv. 7–10)
2. Welcomes Along the Way (vv. 11–16)
 - a. Brothers at Puteoli (vv. 11–14a)
 - b. Brothers at Rome (vv. 14b–16)
3. Jesus and the Jews (vv. 17–24)
 - a. Introduction to the Jewish community (vv. 17–20)
 - b. Ignorance in the Jewish community (vv. 21–22)
 - c. Instruction of the Jewish community (vv. 23–24)
4. Gospel to the Gentiles (vv. 25–31)
 - a. Prophecy of Gentile salvation (vv. 25–27)
 - b. Proclamation of Gentile salvation (v. 28)
 - c. Preaching of Gentile salvation (vv. 30–31)

C. Conclusion: When I Consider How My Light is Spent

VIII. Issues for Discussion

1. Have you ever found yourself in a situation where strangers offered you unexpected kindness? How did you respond? Did you use the opportunity to witness for Christ?
2. When have other Christians welcomed you in a way that brought encouragement and hope to your life? How did you respond? Did you give God thanks for bringing these people into your life?
3. When people ask you about Jesus, how do you convince them to turn to him for salvation? How do you respond if the people do not believe your witness?

Holman New Testament Commentary Gangel, K. O. (1998). Acts (Vol. 5, p. 474). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.