

Acts 28:16-31

28:16 When we arrived in Rome, Paul was permitted to have his own private lodging, though he was guarded by a soldier. At last Paul *arrived in Rome*, the most influential city on earth. This was the fulfillment of a long-term desire (Romans 1:10–16). Paul’s *private lodging* was a rented house (see 28:30). Though *guarded* around the clock (in four-hour shifts) *by a soldier* (perhaps members of the Praetorian—or palace—guard, see Philippians 1:13), Paul had much more freedom than a typical prisoner.

PAUL PREACHES AT ROME UNDER GUARD / 28:17–31

Paul’s first act in Rome was to call together the Jewish leaders. He wanted to declare his innocence of the charges brought against him in Jerusalem. But more than this, he wanted to proclaim the gospel to his Hebrew brothers.

A meeting was arranged in which Paul gave an all-day lecture on the kingdom of God and the Messiahship of Jesus. Only a few of the Jews accepted his message, but even those who rejected the gospel left quietly. Consequently, for two solid years, Paul was able to preach and minister unhindered to all who came to see him in his rented quarters—and the stream of visitors was apparently quite steady.

28:17 Three days after Paul’s arrival, he called together the local Jewish leaders. He said to them, “**Brothers, I was arrested in Jerusalem and handed over to the Roman government, even though I had done nothing against our people or the customs of our ancestors.**” The decree of Claudius expelling Jews from Rome (18:2) happened eleven years previously (a.d. 49–60), so by the time of Paul’s arrival, Jewish leaders were back in Rome. These Jews were likely an unofficial gathering of the leaders of various synagogues, not an official ruling body.

After *three days* (presumably to settle into his new accommodations), Paul *called together the local Jewish leaders* because he did not have the freedom to visit them in their synagogues. Beginning his presentation, Paul stated his innocence in the charge of violating Jewish laws or customs. Nevertheless, he had been *handed over to the Roman government*. This phrasing is similar to Christ’s statements as found in Luke 9:44 and 18:32. The Jews in Rome were not hostile to Paul (see 28:21–22).

28:18–19 “**The Romans tried me and wanted to release me, for they found no cause for the death sentence. But when the Jewish leaders protested the decision, I felt it necessary to appeal to Caesar, even though I had no desire to press charges against my own people.**” Paul reiterated the Romans’ inability or unwillingness to execute him. On three separate occasions, statements had been made to the effect that Paul had done nothing to deserve the *death sentence* (Claudias Lysias in 23:29; Festus in 25:25 and 26:31).

Paul emphasized that he had appealed to Caesar (25:11) because the Jewish leaders had adamantly and unjustly continued to pressure the authorities for a conviction. He felt he had no other recourse. And he further assured the Jews of his own motives in appealing to Caesar—not because he was trying to harm his own countrymen but solely to be declared innocent and set free.

28:20 “**I asked you to come here today so we could get acquainted and so I could tell you that I am bound with this chain because I believe that the hope of Israel—the Messiah—has already come.**” The phrase “the hope of Israel” has been mentioned several times by Paul (see 23:6; 24:15; 26:7; 28:20). For Paul, the messianic hope meant the fulfillment of God’s messianic prophecies first given to the patriarch Abraham. For all of its history, the nation looked forward to a time when God’s anointed one would rule over a heavenly kingdom. Because of his conviction that Jesus of Nazareth was that long-awaited *Messiah* and because of Christ’s resurrection from the dead, Paul was adamant that his message and theology

were consistent with Jewish hope through the ages. Paul wanted his countrymen to come to see (as he had) that this relatively new entity known as the Christian church was not a dangerous sect or departure from traditional orthodox Judaism but simply the next phase in the unfolding plan of God that had been first announced to Abraham.

28:21–22 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. But we want to hear what your views are, for we know that people everywhere are talking against this sect.” The Jewish leaders had not heard specific allegations about Paul and his case, but they had heard a steady stream of negative comments about the *sect* of people who followed the one called Christ. There was a growing group of these people right there in Rome. The people *talking against* Christianity may have been Jews who kept up with events in Israel, together with skeptical Romans. Christians were denounced everywhere by the Romans because they were seen as a threat to the Roman establishment. They believed in one God, whereas the Romans had many gods, including Caesar. The Christians were committed to an authority higher than Caesar.

The Jewish leaders from Jerusalem probably had given up their attempt to have Paul prosecuted once his case came under the jurisdiction of the Roman emperor. Or perhaps they had heard about the shipwreck and presumed that Paul had been killed. In any case, they hadn’t sent any word against Paul to the Jews in Rome. While Jews were allowed to practice their religion, they were viewed with some contempt by their “cosmopolitan” Roman neighbors. Whatever information the Jewish leaders had, they expressed an interest in hearing what Paul had to say.

MISSING HEAVEN BY INCHES

Paul quoted the prophet Isaiah to make the point that though the Jews knew all about God in an academic way, they didn’t really know him personally (28:25–27). Though many of them had God’s Word in their heads, it had never filtered down into their hearts and changed their lives. This is the great danger of being religious. Rich words and meaningful truth can turn into overused clichés and meaningless rituals. Years of going through the motions can cause our hearts to become numb to the truth. Even more sobering is the fact that in this deadened state, people often deceive themselves into thinking they are honoring God. Ask the Spirit of God to keep you open to the truth.

28:23–24 After they had set a day to meet with him, they came to him at his lodgings in great numbers. From morning until evening he explained the matter to them, testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus both from the law of Moses and from the prophets. Some were convinced by what he had said, while others refused to believe. A meeting was arranged, and when the time for that appointment came, *great numbers* of Roman Jews came to hear from Paul. It was an all-day affair, during which Paul used the Old Testament to “explain” the gospel to the Jews. In essence, Paul reminded the Jews of the many Old Testament prophecies and references to the Messiah; then he skillfully demonstrated how Jesus, in his coming, living, dying, and rising, exactly fulfilled every divine promise and every Jewish hope.

The focus of Paul’s message was the kingdom of God. This kingdom was a major preoccupation of Jewish thought and continues to be a major source of discussion. Some Christians believe the kingdom of God has already come in a spiritual sense because of the coming of the King (Luke 10:9–11; 17:20–21) and

his bestowing of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost to dwell in the hearts of believers. Other followers of Christ believe the kingdom is yet future—a full, final, and physical reign of Jesus (after his return) over a perfect earthly kingdom where sin and evil no longer exist.

It is doubtful that Paul lectured all day or that this presentation was a monologue. As per Jewish custom, we can suppose this was an energetic and often heated dialogue, with much questioning back and forth. The effect of this long discourse and discussion was that some of the Jewish leaders *were convinced*. The verb is an imperfect, which probably conveys the idea that they were beginning to be convinced. This does not necessarily imply conversion, at least not as the result of this initial dialogue only. Others, however, *refused to believe*, demonstrating hard-heartedness (see 28:27) and spiritual blindness (Romans 11:10; 2 Corinthians 4:4).

28:25–27 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: ‘Go to this people and say, “You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.” 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.’ ” In this interchange, Paul had the final word, and it was a strong rebuke. He compared the departing, arguing Jewish leaders to the long-ago audience of *Isaiah the prophet* (see Isaiah 6:9–10). Those Jews had heard the very word of God and had seen the spokesman of God, but because of stubbornness and pride, they had been unable to understand and perceive the deeper, life-changing implications of the divine revelation that was being extended to them. Rather than submitting to judgment by the truth, they had sat in judgment of truth. The great irony is that these Jews viewed themselves as religiously successful and slated for divine commendation, when in truth they were spiritually blind, deaf, and under divine condemnation! However, we must not generalize an anti-Semitic attitude in Paul’s words; 28:24 says that some were convinced and believed.

28:28 “So I want you to realize that this salvation from God is also available to the Gentiles, and they will accept it.” As he had done on several prior occasions (see 13:46; 18:6; and 19:8–10), Paul announced a turning from the unresponsive, hard-hearted Jews to the receptive *Gentiles*. From that point on, the non-Jews would be given priority when it came to evangelical witness. At some future point, Paul apparently expected a change of heart by his countrymen (see Romans 11:25–32), but for the immediate future Paul would direct his ministry to those who were eager to embrace the truth about Christ.

MAKING THE MOST OF A BAD SITUATION

Paul remained in Rome under guard (28:16) in a rented house for two years (28:30). There sat the greatest apostle and spokesman for Christianity—unable to move freely and minister as he desired. However, Paul didn’t complain or despair. He simply did what he could. Able to receive visitors, he taught, preached, and counseled even while he was confined to quarters. According to Philippians 4:22, he had a fruitful ministry. He also used the occasion to write epistles (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon) that have impacted millions of believers down through the centuries. If you find yourself in a “negative” or unpleasant situation, look for ways to redeem the circumstances. There is never a time or place in which you can’t glorify and serve God.

28:29 And when he had said these words, the Jews departed and had a great dispute among themselves. This verse is not included in most of the ancient manuscripts. It was most likely a scribal addition, but it adds nothing new. The fact that the Jews were arguing among themselves is a point previously made in 28:25.

28:30–31 For the next two years, Paul lived in his own rented house. He welcomed all who visited him, proclaiming the Kingdom of God with all boldness and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ. And no one tried to stop him. Luke's record ends abruptly, but this was common. A number of ancient works have sudden endings. While Paul was under house arrest, he did more than speak to the Jews. He wrote letters, commonly called his Prison Epistles, to the Ephesians, Colossians, and Philippians. He also wrote personal letters, such as the one to Philemon. This ending shows the gospel going forward to Rome, as the great commission had directed. It had now reached the international capital of the Gentiles.

He *welcomed all who visited him*, and that list was surely long. Luke was with Paul in Rome (2 Timothy 4:11). Timothy often visited him (Philippians 1:1; Colossians 1:1; Philemon 1:1), as did Tychicus (Ephesians 6:21), Epaphroditus (Philippians 4:18), and Mark (Colossians 4:10). Paul witnessed to the whole Roman guard (Philippians 1:13) and was involved with the Roman believers.

Tradition says that Paul was released after two years of house arrest in Rome and then set off on a fourth missionary journey. Five reasons for this tradition are as follows: (1) Luke does not give us an account of his trial before Caesar—and Luke was a detailed chronicler; (2) the prosecution had two years to bring the case to trial, and time may have run out; (3) in his letter to the Philippians, written during his imprisonment in Rome, Paul implied that he would soon be released and would do further traveling; (4) Paul mentions several places where he intended to take the gospel, but he never visited those places in his first three journeys; (5) early Christian literature talks plainly about other travels by Paul.

During Paul's time of freedom, he may have continued to travel extensively, even going to Spain (see Romans 15:24, 28) and back to the churches in Greece. The books of 1 Timothy and Titus were written during this time. Later, Paul was imprisoned again, probably in Rome, where he wrote his last letter (2 Timothy). During this first Roman imprisonment, he spoke *with all boldness ... and no one tried to stop him*. The Greek word *akolutos* ("without hindrance") is the last word of Acts, thus ending the book on a triumphal note.

Why does Acts end here and so abruptly? The book is not about the life of Paul but about the spread of the gospel, and that had been clearly presented by Luke. God apparently thought it was not necessary for someone to write an additional book describing the continuing history of the early church. Now that the gospel had been preached and established at the center of trade and government, it would spread across the world.

THE ADVENTURE CONTINUES

The book of Acts deals with the history of the Christian church and its expansion in ever-widening circles touching Jerusalem, Antioch, Ephesus, and Rome—the most influential cities in the western world. Acts also shows the mighty miracles and testimonies of the heroes and martyrs of the early church—Peter, Stephen, James, Paul. All the ministry was prompted and held together by the Holy Spirit, working in the lives of ordinary people—merchants, travelers, slaves, jailers, church leaders, males, females, Gentiles, Jews, rich, and poor. The book of Acts ends abruptly, showing that the history of the church was not yet complete. Many unsung heroes of the faith would continue the work, through the Holy Spirit, in succeeding generations, changing the world with a changeless message—that Jesus Christ is Savior and Lord for all who call on him. Today we are called to be a part of the sequel, to be the unsung heroes in the continuing

story of the spread of the gospel. It is that same message that we Christians are to take to our world so that many more may hear and believe.

Life Application Bible Commentary Barton, B. B., & Osborne, G. R. (1999). [Acts](#) (pp. 452–458). Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House.