

ACTS—WEEK 25

ROME AT LAST



F. Michael Slay
A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

*The Cover Picture is “Paul’s Shipwreck” by Ludolf Backhuysen (1630–1708),
on display at Ostfriesisches Landesmuseum, Emden, Germany.*

Paul lands in an unlikely spot, and what does he do?

Preach the gospel, of course. And, not surprisingly, it takes hold rapidly. His arrival in Rome looks like a triumphal entry.

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Thank you.

Acts 28:1–31 — Rome at Last
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1 Acts 28:1–6 (ESV)

After we were brought safely through, we then learned that the island was called Malta. The native people showed us unusual kindness, for they kindled a fire and welcomed us all, because it had begun to rain and was cold. When Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks and put them on the fire, a viper came out because of the heat and fastened on his hand. When the native people saw the creature hanging from his hand, they said to one another, “No doubt this man is a murderer. Though he has escaped from the sea, Justice has not allowed him to live.” He, however, shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm. They were waiting for him to swell up or suddenly fall down dead. But when they had waited a long time and saw no misfortune come to him, they changed their minds and said that he was a god.

Okay Paul, now you’re just showing off. Cheap tricks are beneath you, dude. Is there some point to this?

Of course there is. And Paul didn’t dream up this stunt anyway—God did. So what’s He up to?

Acts 28:7-10 (ESV)

Now in the neighborhood of that place were lands belonging to the chief man of the island, named Publius, who received us and entertained us hospitably for three days. It happened that the father of Publius lay sick with fever and dysentery. And Paul visited him and prayed, and putting his hands on him healed him. And when this had taken place, the rest of the people on the island who had diseases also came and were cured. They also honored us greatly, and when we were about to sail, they put on board whatever we needed.

Although Luke doesn’t mention Paul preaching the gospel to the Maltese, does anyone doubt it? The snake trick was just to get everyone’s attention. That’s how the Lord brought the gospel to Malta.

Don’t forget that the storm and the shipwreck (and even Paul appealing to Caesar) were all part of His plan.

We also don’t hear anything else about the church in Malta. As we’ll see next, Paul is there for three months—easily enough time for him to plant a church. If he wrote an epistle to them, it didn’t survive.

The world is a tapestry of many threads, which connect majestically.

Some of those threads are long. For example, you and I get to read about what happened on Malta because Luke was on the boat. God planned that too.

Think long range—back into the past. What were the forks in the road that led to where you are now? What mistakes (or wise choices) determined your path? What were the surprise plot twists?

Obviously, you can’t know what the different life would have been like, but praise God that you got here.

<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/173536>

2 Acts 28:11–16 (ESV)

After three months we set sail in a ship that had wintered in the island, a ship of Alexandria, with the twin gods as a figurehead. Putting in at Syracuse, we stayed there for three days. And from there we made a circuit and arrived at Rhegium. And after one day a south wind sprang up, and on the second day we came to Puteoli. There we found brothers and were invited to stay with them for seven days. And so we came to Rome. And the brothers there, when they heard about us, came as far as the Forum of Appius and Three Taverns to meet us. On seeing them, Paul thanked God and took courage. And when we came into Rome, Paul was allowed to stay by himself, with the soldier who guarded him.

After all his trials and tribulations, Paul finally catches a break. There are many brothers in Italy, and Paul is encouraged by their willingness to travel many miles to see him. Then, when he gets to Rome, he is granted unusual privileges for a prisoner. *Paul was allowed to stay by himself, with the soldier who guarded him.*

That means that Paul isn't in a prison; he's under house arrest, living somewhere in the city. Just imagine what kind of experience the soldier guarding him was having. Undoubtedly, he quickly realized that Paul could be trusted. Since Paul was a veritable miracle factory, the soldier's opinion of Paul soon rose beyond mere trust. It's easy to see him saying, "I love my job."

This was essential to Paul's ministry in Rome. It's almost as hard to get into a prison as it is to get out of one. If Paul was in a secure facility, his ability to entertain guests would have been severely limited. The epistles Paul wrote from Rome would have been hindered.

Paul's life would ultimately be cut short by the emperor, but his time in Rome was incredibly productive.

In Martin Luther King, Jr.'s most prophetic speech, he talked about "getting to the promised land." He famously predicted, "I may not get there with you."

But before that, he spent a lot of time talking about the things he did live to see and how close he came to not living to see them. He was thankful to God for the years that he had been given.

Martin referred to the prospect of growing old as "longevity." He said, "Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will."

Though our pop culture won't admit it, that line is the key to the speech and the key to Martin's life. It's the key to your life, too. It's the key to life, period. If Jesus is your Lord, then doing His will has to be your focus. Otherwise, the word "Lord" has no meaning.

Read King's speech and let his spiritual attitude sink in. His sincerity is awesome. Ask God to help you capture some of that. The day after King gave this speech, he was assassinated.

<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkivebeentothemountaintop.htm>

3 Acts 28:17–22 (ESV)

After three days he called together the local leaders of the Jews, and when they had gathered, he said to them, “Brothers, though I had done nothing against our people or the customs of our fathers, yet I was delivered as a prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans. When they had examined me, they wished to set me at liberty, because there was no reason for the death penalty in my case. But because the Jews objected, I was compelled to appeal to Caesar—though I had no charge to bring against my nation. For this reason, therefore, I have asked to see you and speak with you, since it is because of the hope of Israel that I am wearing this chain.” And they said to him, “We have received no letters from Judea about you, and none of the brothers coming here has reported or spoken any evil about you. But we desire to hear from you what your views are, for with regard to this sect we know that everywhere it is spoken against.”

It’s curious that the Jews in Rome had heard of *this sect* but not of Paul. Remember, Paul was arrested a long time before he even started his journey to Rome.

When two years had passed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus, but because Felix wanted to grant a favor to the Jews, he left Paul in prison. — Acts 24:27

Nevertheless, they say, “*We have received no letters from Judea about you, and none of the brothers coming here has reported or spoken any evil about you.*”

Apparently, the commotion Paul inspired was only local news. Some people knew he had appealed to Caesar, but having lost their chance to ambush him, they may have given up.

But the really amazing thing is that the *local leaders of the Jews* said, “*But we desire to hear from you what your views are, for with regard to this sect we know that everywhere it is spoken against.*” That kind of truth-seeking curiosity is impressive. They had heard Christianity bad-mouthed, but instead of just buying into all the negative spin, they became curious to hear the other side.

If only people were like that today.

It’d be great if everyone else was truly open-minded like us, right?

Not. We need to remove the log in our own eye to see clearly to remove the speck in someone else’s eye.

This is a tricky task because we obviously cannot see our own biases. How can we learn to notice things we’ve been missing? We don’t even know we missed them. That’s why this is a prayer request and not an exercise. We have to ask the Lord to open our eyes.

That said, there is another mechanism that can help—an accountability relationship. If you have a friend who is willing to call you out when you mess up, your eyes will get opened a lot.

Warning: whether through prayer or through a friend, having your eyes opened can be painful.

4 Acts 28:23–29 (ESV)

When they had appointed a day for him, they came to him at his lodging in greater numbers. From morning till evening he expounded 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. And some were convinced by what he said, but others disbelieved. And disagreeing among themselves, they departed after Paul had made one statement:

“The Holy Spirit was right in saying to your fathers through Isaiah the prophet: ‘Go to this people, and say, “You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive.” For this people’s heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed; lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them.’ Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.”

By now Paul knows that the one thing guaranteed to tick off the Jews is telling them that he’s taking the gospel to the gentiles. When he says that, they leave (or worse). So, why does he do that this time?

Unlike many of Paul’s previous audiences, these Jews are receptive. They’re genuinely interested, saying, *“We desire to hear from you what your views are, for with regard to this sect we know that everywhere it is spoken against.”* And after Paul spoke, *some were convinced by what he said, but others disbelieved.*

So far, so good. But then Paul gives his usual explanation of the Jews rejecting the gospel, ending with, *“Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.”* *And disagreeing among themselves, they departed.* This looks like a bad ending. But is it?

Paul has been preaching *from morning till evening ... trying to convince them about Jesus.* But when Paul preaches late into the night, people sometimes doze off—and even fall out of windows (see Acts 20:9).

One of the challenges of preaching is to get people to remember what you said. When the sermon ends, the lesson fades. Paul’s harsh ending was designed to keep the discussion going. They didn’t just leave; *disagreeing among themselves, they departed.* This sets up his points to be hot topics around the water cooler.

So, after spending most of his life being falsely accused of rabble rousing, Paul finally does some.

Paul’s imprisonment limited his options; he had to do something radical to impress his lesson on his audience. We have other ways. So, how can you impress the gospel on people?

“If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.” — Romans 12:20b

The point of the burning coals isn’t to injure folks; it’s to get their attention. Charity, especially radical, over-the-top charity, confronts non-believers with something they cannot explain away.

5 Acts 28:30–31 (ESV)

He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.

One of the oddest things about Acts is the way it ends. Luke concludes by summarizing two years of Paul's ministry in a single sentence. He was *proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance*.

But Luke leaves everything hanging. Paul is alive—as are virtually all the other major players. Everything is ongoing. Nothing wraps up

It's as if this is just the second book in a series. It feels like Luke decided that he'd written enough and just stopped, put a stamp on it, and dropped it in the mail.

It is a letter after all. Luke is updating Theophilus on how things are going. Luke caught up to the present at the time he wrote this letter, and so it was done. While Luke is a very thorough writer, he doesn't seem to fancy himself as a chief historian.

But that's what he turned out to be.

Even after Luke had completed his two great works, no one had any idea how significant they would become. He may have been a great doctor, but what he's known for is two long letters. The people who actually read those letters couldn't have imagined that they'd be copied and translated literally a billion times. They didn't even have a concept of numbers that large.

God uses people in ways they can't imagine and don't understand. Even after the fact, we rarely know what we've done. Children we teach will outlive us by decades, and may change the world. Something as seemingly insignificant as babysitting can alter history. You just never know.

In His infinite wisdom, God doesn't let us see all the consequences of our actions. It's way too grand for us to comprehend anyway. But this can make serving Him feel unrewarding. You do things that you know are good, but you often don't see how they mattered.

This is one of the reasons why we are commanded to encourage one another.

And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near. — Hebrews 10:24–25

How can we encourage our brethren in Christ?

Ask God to show you folks who could use a boost, and ask Him to show you how to encourage them.

