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Series: *Acts---The Cure Goes Viral*

Title: *Rome*

Text: Acts 28:1-31

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Way back in my seminary days, at the end of a semester, as time for our final exams drew near, professors would offer a “review session” to help us prepare for those important tests.

Wise seminarians would pay close attention in these review sessions because it helped them know what was going to be on the test.

I don’t know if you’ve been counting, but we’ve been studying the book of Acts together for about eight months now, the equivalent of two semesters, and today is the last message. I’d like you to think of this final sermon as sort of an “exam review day” because I want us to use our study of these final verses of Luke’s history book as an opportunity to review what we’ve learned. Don’t misunderstand, I’m not threatening you with an exam, although I was thinking this week that a pop quiz every once in a while might increase sermon attentiveness! Of course I’m just kidding! There will be no “formal” exam, but I will say this---and please hear me. I sincerely believe that our future as a church will depend on how well we as its members remember all that we have learned in these past two “semesters.” Our ability to continue to Share The Cure---the Gospel message---will be greatly impacted by how well we remember what we learned about that time 2,000 years ago when the Cure went viral. So, in essence the actual “exam” begins right after this service and continues as long as God keeps each of us serving here in His body at Redland.

Now, before we continue with our REVIEW session, let me remind you of the SETTING of these last few verses. Remember, as Peggy told us last week, Paul had been shipwrecked on the shore of the island of Malta. Luke uses this Greek word to refer to the residents of Malta---“barbarous.” It’s the word from which we get our word “barbarian.” Your Bible may even use that word in its translation of verse 1 of Acts 28. But this doesn’t mean these islanders were barbarians, because Greeks in that day called anyone barbarian if they spoke a language other than Greek. They did this because to them other languages sounded like a cacophony of sounds in which they could distinguish no words. Kind of like some rap “music” I’ve heard.

All kidding aside, the Greeks thought the noises made by people speaking other languages sounded like variations of the sound, “bar-bar” hence their word, “barbaros.” I take the time to point this out because I want you to be sure and understand that the people who lived on this island were ANYTHING BUT barbarians. Do you remember what Peggy said the name “Malta” meant? Right, it meant “refuge,” and the Maltans who came to the aid of Paul and his traveling companions helped Malta to live up to its name because they were very compassionate toward Paul and his fellow castaways. Look at verse 2 where Luke tells us,
“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.”

Look also at verse 10 where Luke goes on to say, ***“They honored us in many ways and when we were ready to sail, they furnished us with the supplies we needed.”***

Well, as Peggy said, for the next three months the Maltans took care of Paul and his companions, feeding them, providing shelter, and no doubt clothing, helping them recuperate from their near-death ordeal and prepare themselves for the final leg of their journey as they rested and waited for the winter storm season to pass.

But, these months on this island weren’t a vacation for Paul. I mean he didn’t spend the time just sipping coconut juice under some Maltan palm tree. No, he used this time to minister to the islanders themselves. God used Paul to heal the governor’s father and then the rest of those on the island who were sick or injured. These were busy months of compassionate ministry in Jesus’ name ministry that I am sure opened the door for Paul to share the Gospel!

A few years ago, when we toured France, relying on the highly-rated Hugh Faulconer Travel Agency, we stayed in a chateau that had been used as a headquarters during part of the D-Day invasion. I remember thinking, *“General Bradley may have slept in my bed.”*

There were two other guests staying there and they told us they were from Malta. I said, *“Oh---Malta---that’s where Paul was shipwrecked on his way to Rome.”* And they said, *“Yes---and when Paul came all the people on Malta became Christians. Paul changed everything for our little island.”* He did indeed.

Well, in the early Spring the weather finally grew favorable, and they boarded another Alexandrian grain ship and began the final leg of their journey to Rome. Stand if able, take your Bibles now and read along with me, beginning with verse 11.

Acts 28:11-14

11 – After three months we put out to sea in a ship that had wintered in the island. It was an Alexandrian ship with the figurehead of the twin gods Castor and Pollux.

By the way, Castor and Pollux were the names of the twin sons of Zeus and were revered as the protectors of men on the sea. Many Roman ships bore their image as a sort of plea for safety.

12 – We put in at Syracuse and stayed there three days.

13 - From there we set sail and arrived at Rhegium. The next day the south wind came up, and on the following day we reached Puteoli.

14 -There we found some brothers who invited us to spend a week with them. And so we came to Rome.

Now, imagine how Paul felt at this point. He had wanted to preach the gospel in Rome for years. Do you remember his words in Acts 19:21? He said, *“After I have been to Jerusalem, Macedonia, and Achaia, I must visit Rome also.”* And, in Romans 1:15 he had said, *“I am EAGER to preach the gospel to you who are at Rome.”* Not being able to get to Rome, Paul did the next best thing. He wrote to the believers there and in this way they had become long-distance friends---sort of international pen pals. He had heard about them through mutual acquaintances---and in admiration of their courageous faith, he had written them a letter---his doctrinal masterpiece, The Epistle of Paul to the Romans. Remember it was delivered and then taught by that deacon named Phoebe Now, after a harrowing journey on the high seas, Paul had finally arrived to meet them fact to face! He must have been thrilled! And these Roman believers were excited to finally meet him as well. In fact, many of them journeyed several miles down the famous Appian Way to greet him.

Plus, remember the promise Jesus made to Paul when he was in the Antonia Fortress? He said, *“Take courage! As you have testified about Me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome.”* (Acts 23:11) So Paul was experiencing not only the answer to his prayer---but the fulfillment of Jesus’ promise.

Acts 28:15-31

15 - The brothers there had heard that we were coming, and they traveled as far as the Forum of Appius and the Three Taverns to meet us. At the sight of these men Paul thanked God and was encouraged.

16 -When we got to Rome, Paul was allowed to live by himself, with a soldier to guard him.

17 - Three days later he called together the leaders of the Jews. When they had assembled, Paul said to them: “My brothers, although I have done nothing against our people or against the customs of our ancestors, I was arrested in Jerusalem and handed over to the Romans.

18 - They examined me and wanted to release me, because I was not guilty of any crime deserving death.

19 - But when the Jews objected, I was compelled to appeal to Caesar---not that I had any charge to bring against my own people.

20 - For this reason I have asked to see you and talk with you. It is because of the hope of Israel that I am bound with this chain.”

21 - 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.

22 – But we want to hear what your views are, for we know that people everywhere are talking against this sect."

23 - They arranged to meet Paul on a certain day and came in even larger numbers to the place where he was staying. From morning till evening he explained and declared to them the kingdom of God and tried to convince them about Jesus from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets.

24 - Some were convinced by what he said, but others would not believe.

25 - 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:

26 - "Go to this people and say, "You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.

27 - 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."

28 - "Therefore I want you to know that God's salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen!"

29 – After he said this, the Jews left, arguing vigorously among themselves.

30 – For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him.

31 – Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, we've covered a lot of material these past months.

- For example, in our survey of Luke's history book we studied the lives of some of the first Christian leaders--- amazing believers like Peter, Barnabas, Philip, James, Paul.
- We also learned about the power of prayer. Do you remember Peter's miraculous release from his prison cell in the Antonia Fortress in answer to the prayers of the church?
- With his witness to that Ethiopian Eunuch Philip taught us about the kind of attitudes we need in order to be successful as personal evangelists---effective CURE-sharers.
- And then, speaking of evangelists, as we looked at Peter's experience with Cornelius, that Roman centurion who wanted to become a Christian---this helped us to see the evils of prejudice. It reminded us that we are all made in the image of God---all the objects of His great love---a love seen in His sending His only Son to die for us.

We could go on and on listing all God has taught us in the past year---but due to time constraints, this morning I want to build our "review session" around three main truths that we have covered in our study, truths I want us to be sure and never forget.

1.) First, in the past year we have seen the power of a HEALTHY CHURCH.

When I say "healthy," I'm referring to a group of believers who show by their actions that they truly acknowledge Jesus Christ as Head. They aren't like diseased physical bodies plagued by Parkinson's or muscular dystrophy---illnesses in which the body that doesn't obey the head.

No, healthy churches obediently yield to Jesus' will in all things.

Their acknowledgment of His headship is seen most clearly in their relationships, relationships that reflect the way Jesus relates to each of us. In short, we have learned that in healthy churches people act like Jesus to each other. This leads the outside lost world to recognize Jesus in them and the result is a healthy church that literally draws lost people to our Lord. It's just as Jesus promised in John 12:32, **"If I be lifted up, I will draw all men to Me."**

In her book *Saints and Snobs*, Marion Jacobsen refers to this and says, *"People are not persuaded, they're attracted. We communicate far more by what we are than by what we say."*

We saw this important principle of church growth in Luke's history book modeled in the first church, the church in Jerusalem. The 2nd and 4th chapters of this book tell us that these first believers did indeed acknowledge Christ as Head--seen in the way they so obviously got their relationships---their "Christlike one-anothering" right! I mean, they weren't

perfect---no church is----but their corporate dedication to the careful study of the Apostle’s teaching and to the worship of God gave them a truly blessed fellowship---one that God used in a powerful way to draw thousands of lost people to faith in Him.

Take your Bibles and flip back to those chapters and I’ll show you a couple examples. Acts 2:45 says, **“Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need.”** Acts 4:32 says that **“...no one in this church claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had.”**

Because they related in this selfless way---because these first believers lifted up Christ in their sacrificial relationships their church grew. As Acts 2:7 says, **“...the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”**

Think of it. This first group of believers was a powerful witness for the love of God in spite of the fact that they met right under the noses of the Jewish religious leaders---the same leaders who had plotted Jesus’ death. Luke sums up this important principle of church health in Acts 4:32 when he refers to this first church and says, **“All the believers were one in HEART and MIND.”**

They were one---unified---because they each acknowledged that Jesus was the HEAD and the HEART of that church. They allowed Him to use their flesh to lovingly minister to the world around them. We must remember this lesson from Acts and commit to do the same if we are to be and do all God calls us to be and do here at Redland. We will show that we have “passed the test” if we realize that in order for our church to be the powerful witness God wants it to be---in order for us to be a healthy church---we must each strive to obey Jesus in everything we say and do because, as someone once put it, **“The world will never be won to Christ until we are one IN Christ.”**

I’ve seen that oneness recently at Redland.

- In the Trunk or Treat dozens of families and dozens of individuals came together to make that event work. People donated tons of candy---they decorated their cars---they worked at registration and the 200+ people who came saw that UNITY of heart and MIND.
- Last Sunday night as we drove into Derwood after spending the weekend with Daniel and Ashley, we noticed a completed, well-lighted GA-GA pit and tons of people playing and watching. The people who put that together under the leadership of our teen contractor Jillian Holmes were one in heart and mind. From now on everyone who drives down busy Muncaster Mill Road when that pit is being used will know that something exciting is happening at Redland. It’s always exciting---it’s always attracting to lost people when they see a group of Christians who are one in heart and mind.
- This past week TONS of Redlanders worked hard to get the apartment set up for the Arya family---the Afghan family we have adopted. This team of Redlanders found furniture or donated furniture. They filled the pantry and fridge with Afghan food. They decorated the apartment so that it looks cozy and welcoming.

Louise Brinkman even called on her Afghan neighbor to help with translation and shopping for the kind of food the Aryas would like. I’m sure the Arya family saw that Redland is of one heart and mind.

I’m so very thankful for our church---for the health of this body---a body that follows Jesus---the Head! As long as we remember this principle---as long as we work in response to Jesus’ will---as long as we strive to be “one in heart and mind” ---well then like the church in Jerusalem, this will be a powerful church---a church that God uses to do amazing things in His kingdom---a church that draws lost people to the CURE--Jesus. Write that down. Etch it in your mind. We must never forget this first truth that our study of Acts has taught us.

2.) **And then, this past year we have also learned a great deal about the Power of the HOLY SPIRIT.**

The best illustration of this is seen in the lives of the disciples themselves. I mean there is no way that on their own they would have been capable for the task that Jesus gave them in Acts 1:8. From a purely human standpoint it was ridiculous to think that those eleven men---fearfully hiding behind closed doors in that upper room could be His witnesses in Jerusalem---much less in Judea and Samaria and to the utter most parts of the earth.

I mean, their courage was just too weak. Remember? They had not acquitted themselves well during those hours and days surrounding Jesus' arrest and crucifixion. They fled in eleven different directions. Only John came back. Do you remember the behavior of Peter the night of Jesus' arrest? Three times he vehemently denied even knowing Jesus.

But it wasn't just their cowardice. There were things these men and women still did not understand about the Kingdom of God---even after 40 days of instruction at the feet of our RISEN Lord. My point is, there was no way that on their own this ragged group of losers could fulfill Jesus' commission, but our study of this history book shows they did exactly that! How? What was their secret? They had a source of infinite power and wisdom---the Holy Spirit of God. With The Holy Spirit at their disposal, they WERE able to turn the world upside down!

In fact, many have suggested that a better title for Luke's history book would be, The Acts of the HOLY SPIRIT because it is the record of what the first Christians were able to do, as they were empowered by the indwelling Spirit of our Lord. Peter's powerful words before the Sanhedrin and then on Pentecost Sunday; Philip's words to that Ethiopian Eunuch; Paul's words before Festus and Agrippa---they were powerful because of the Holy Spirit. These men experienced the fulfillment of Jesus' promise when He said, ***"When you are brought before synagogues, rulers, and authorities, do not worry about how to defend yourselves, or what to say. For at that time the Holy Spirit will teach you what you should say."***

That same Holy Spirit power is available to us-to each and every Christian. When we repent of our sin and ask Jesus to come into our heart and life as Lord and Savior, He does. From that point on, just as Jesus promised He is WITHIN us... ***"always---even to the end of the earth."*** (Matthew 28:20) As Christians, we can relate to what Emerson has said, ***"What lies BEHIND us and what lies BEFORE us are tiny matters to what lies WITHIN us."*** I would change it to ***"WHO lies WITHIN us"*** for, as 1st John 4:4 says, ***"Greater is He Who is IN YOU, than he who is in the world."*** Ephesians 1:19-20 says, ***"How tremendous is the POWER available to us who believe in God."***

You know, so many local churches fail to do anything significant because they ignore the instructions of our Lord and only attempt things they know they can do in their own power.

They don't rely on God's Spirit in them. Pastor Lloyd John Ogilvie gives us a window---or rather a port hole---through which we can see this truth in his description of that grand old ocean liner, the Queen Mary. He writes, *"I can remember admiring the gallant determination with which the historic craft cut through the high waves. As I walked on deck I would try to recapture the feeling of what it must have been like to be aboard the "Mary" as a lovely pleasure vessel---and then as a troop ship carefully evading the German submarines. The next time I saw the Queen Mary was as a museum piece, docked in the Long Beach harbor. Her last voyage had been around the world and then into the harbor, where she was stripped of her vitals. The gigantic engine had been removed as well as most of the sailing equipment. She sat there motionless, attached tightly to the dock. Shops now line the decks to sell souvenirs to visitors. The dining and lounge areas provide meeting places for groups and the cabins have been refurbished as hotel rooms for conventions. Actors have been hired to act out the parts of officers and crew with carefully studied British accents. In spite of all this, the one thing the Queen Mary can't do not is to fulfill the reason for which she was built: to sail the high sea. I couldn't help feeling disappointed. Everything was the same, yet nothing was the same. The ship had become a monument to past glory."*

Unfortunately, many churches are like that-monuments to past glory. They look like a church but they don't do what a church was called to do. They are weak and powerless. It is my prayer that one thing this study will have taught us here at Redland is that we can avoid this fate as long as we obey our Head---remembering that we can do ALL things through Him Who strengthens us. God will do amazing things---exciting things through us as long as we obey Him even when---no, ESPECIALLY when, He calls us to tasks that are beyond our strength.

We must remember that as Vance Havner once said, *"We are not going to move this world by criticism of it nor conformity to it but by the combustion within it of lives ignited by the Spirit of God."* I love the words of the late Bill Bright who said, *"We serve a GREAT God, why should we not attempt to do GREAT things for Him?!"*

3.) And then our study has also taught us the unstoppable power of the GOSPEL.

In our survey of this book we have seen that in spite of repeated persecutions---in spite of continued opposition by many of the Jewish leaders including the ones who Paul met with in Rome---in spite of the hardship of storms and shipwrecks---in spite of all this, the good news of the Gospel spread just as Jesus said it would, ***“to Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria and to the uttermost parts of the earth.”*** (Acts 1:8)---such that by the time we get to this final chapter, Christianity has become a world religion. All this shows that just as Jesus said in Matthew 16:18, nothing will stop the spread of the gospel! Not even ***“...the gates of Hell will prevail against it.”***

We see a perfect example of this here in Chapter 28 as Paul is under arrest, confined to an apartment chained 24 hours a day seven days a week to a Roman soldier, a member of the crack Praetorian guard. You'd think this would stop Paul from doing what God had called him to Rome to do--share the good news of the Gospel. But it didn't! You see, the Praetorian Guard were not just any run of the mill soldiers. They were the very elite, Imperial Guard of Rome. Their unit had been founded by the Emperor Augustus himself and were made up of a body of ten thousand handpicked troops--the best of the best.

They were literally the power behind the throne of Rome. It was the Prefect of the Praetorian Guard---the commanding officer of this unit---to whom Paul was handed over to when he arrived. So, twenty-four hours a day, in six hour shifts each, one after another of these select soldiers was chained to the Apostle Paul and forced to be with him. They heard the conversations Paul had with his visitors as they discussed spiritual things. They listened as he dictated the books of Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. Every word was heard by a member of this unit. They were constantly bound to this man who prayed without ceasing.

Talk about a captive audience! Warren Wiersbe writes, *“Little did the Romans realize that the chains they affixed to his wrists would release Paul instead of binding him!”*

Paul's experience shows us that nothing can stop the gospel not even this imprisonment, because God used it as an opportunity for the gospel of Christ to penetrate into the ranks of the most powerful men in the empire and from them into the city of Rome and from Rome to soldiers stationed all over the world.

In my mind the guard he was chained to as he wrote Philippians 1:13 had become a believer.

So, perhaps Paul winked at him as he wrote, ***“...it has become clear through out the whole palace guard that I am in chains because of Christ.”*** Today in Rome you can see a square of plaster cut from the wall of the barracks in the Palace of the Caesars. On it is scratched a human figure with a donkey's head. The figure is nailed to a cross, and a man is pictured kneeling before it. This artwork is an obvious insult to a Roma soldier who converted to Christianity, for the picture bears the inscription, *“Anexamenos worships his God.”*

But the Praetorian Guard were not the only group of people that Paul's arrest and confinement gave him contact with. It also gave him access to the officials in the emperor's court. Paul was in Rome as an official prisoner, and his case was an important one. You see, the Roman government had to determine the official status of this new “Christian sect.” They wondered, was it merely another sect of the Jews? Or was it something new and possibly dangerous? Imagine how pleased Paul must have been knowing that, thanks to his imprisonment, the court officials themselves were forced to study the doctrines of the Christian faith?! Perhaps he remembered God's promise in Isaiah 55:11, ***“My Word will not return to Me void but will accomplish what I desire and will achieve the purpose for which I sent it.”***

Another thing, Paul's confinement encouraged the other Christians in Rome to share the gospel more boldly. In other words, they decided that if God could use Paul IN prison, He certainly could use them OUTSIDE of prison. Paul's courage gave them courage to share their faith throughout the capitol city. In Philippians 1:14 Paul referred to this when he wrote, ***“Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly.”***

In short, because of Paul's imprisonment Jesus was literally the talk of the town. All this shows that nothing stops the spread of the Gospel. It should remind us of Jesus' promise, ***"This gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come."*** (Matthew 24:14) The Gospel will spread UNHINDERED until all have heard---then Jesus will come.

All that has happened in Afghanistan in the past few months is proof of that. When we pulled out, the Taliban took over and that means missionaries will no longer be able to go there. But even that has not HINDERED the spread of the Gospel. I see that in two ways.

First that many Afghans who are Christians obeyed our Head and turned down our offer to come to the U.S. One Afghan believer said, *"This is where God has placed us. God is certainly able to protect us, and if He chooses not to protect us, we are willing to suffer and even die for the name of Christ."* These believers are committed to sharing the Gospel, they know it could cost them their lives---but if it does---they know they would "be airlifted" to a better place. They know this is not true of their Muslim neighbors. So they let them go in their place.

And go they did. About 40,000 Afghans, most of them Muslims, were airlifted here---where they can hear the Gospel---unhindered. NOTHING stops the power of the Gospel!

In fact, if I'm not mistaken, the last word of Acts in the Greek is "UNHINDERED." So, I guess the question we must ask ourselves is will we decide to be a part of this or will we sit on the side lines? Will we join God in His work of telling the whole world of His love in sending Jesus?

You may be wondering what happened to Paul. Luke doesn't tell us. But using tradition and other Scriptures we can piece together the story of the rest of his life. At the end of a two-year period, he was released from his confinement. Apparently, he did appear before the emperor and his case was dismissed. The letter of Titus tells us that he went back to the island of Crete where he left Titus in charge of organizing the ministry there. Paul also visited Ephesus again, leaving Timothy to lead that flock. It is very likely that he went to Spain as he had hungered to. Many scholars even think he took the gospel as far as Britain.

In any case, it is clear that eventually he was arrested again. You see, in A.D. 64 Nero suddenly slammed shut the door of religious freedom. Insane and infamously cruel, he blamed the Christians for the terrible fire in Rome that he himself had ordered set. In this way he ignited a vicious persecution of believers, and Paul was probably arrested as part of this and dragged to Rome as a prisoner. This time, instead of being allowed to live in a hired home, he was thrown into a dark and slimy dungeon---the Mamertime Prison. You can visit Paul's cell there in Rome today. In that cell he wrote his second letter to Timothy, a letter that reflects the conditions of that confinement: conditions so cold and dank, that he asked Timothy to bring him his winter coat. Remember, he had left it in Troas. Finally, according to tradition, he was led out of his cell one day in the early spring of AD67 and taken outside the walls of Rome. They marched him to the third milestone on the Ostian Way, to a little pinewood in a glade---a glade of the tombs, known now as Tre Fontane. There he knelt down and a sword flashed in the sun severing his head from his body and in that instant the apostle went home to be with the Lord he had served so faithfully.

Luke doesn't include this last chapter of Paul's life in his book because the book is not about Paul---but rather about the spread of the Gospel and it has continued to spread UNHINDERED---long after his death.

Please note, this is an unfinished book--one that Christians like you and me are continuing to write. The literal Greek translation of the title of this book of Luke's is this: *"Acts of Apostolic People"* – no definite article, just ACTS---as if there are more ACTS to come. And there ARE because as Christians, WE---you and me---WE are apostolic people! We are just like Peter and Paul and the others---in that we are people who know Jesus personally---who bear personal witness to His presence and power in our lives. You and I are living out the subsequent chapters of "The Acts of Apostolic People" sharing the gospel as we go about our lives and we will continue to do so until Jesus returns to take us home.

So this book does not have an end. In fact as we read verse 31 we have come not to an end but just the end of the beginning!

As we enter our time of invitation I would challenge you to begin a new chapter of the Acts of God in your life right now. Commit to always listen when His Holy Spirit speaks---pledge to trust in and rely on His power---instead of your own. Decide right now that you will always ACT when God tells you to. Like young Samuel even now say, ***“Speak Lord for Your servant is listening.”*** And if God tells you to respond publicly as we sing then do so. Come and join our church family---profess your faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior or just come to the altar and pray.

But come---ACT---on any prompting of God’s Spirit.