

MBC – 11/15/2020 – Pastor Doug Thompson
“The Unfinished Story”
 Acts 28

(Pray)

We left last Sunday on a cliffhanger: Paul is on his way to Rome when he finds himself in the worst storm of his life. God promised that no lives would be lost but that the ship would be destroyed – both promises came true: the ship was smashed to pieces, but Paul and the other 275 passengers on the ship all made it safely to the shore of an unknown island. Some swam, some held on to pieces of the wrecked ship. But where are they? And what is going to happen from here? Let’s read—

I. Shipwrecks and snakebites. (vv.1-6)

- Acts 28:1–6 ¹After we were brought safely through, we then learned that the island was called Malta. ²The native people showed us unusual kindness, for they kindled a fire and welcomed us all, because it had begun to rain and was cold. ³When 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. ⁴When 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.” ⁵He, however, shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm. ⁶They 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.

You might read this and think that they had landed on some island with primitive people wearing loin cloths and brandishing spears! But this was a well-known island with highly civilized people. Malta is about 18 miles long and 8 miles wide; it’s 58 miles south of Sicily and 180 miles north of modern day Libya in N. Africa. It was ruled by a Roman governor and many of the citizens of the island were retired Roman soldiers and their families. It was known for its wealth and beautiful homes.

- We get thrown off because Luke calls the people “natives,” the Gk. word is *barbarians*! But in that day, to Greeks and Romans, any people who didn’t speak Gk. sounded like they were just babbling: “bar-bar-bar” – that’s where the word “barbarian” comes from.

They actually turned out to be the most gracious unbelievers we meet in Acts: Luke says that they showed “unusual kindness” to these shipwrecked men – and remember that most of them were condemned criminals. Even though it was rainy and cold, they gathered wood for a fire to warm all of these men.

And Paul wasn’t too good to help: He gathered up an armful of sticks, but a hibernating poisonous snake was there, and when Paul put the wood on the fire, it bit him –you can picture Paul lifting up his arm and this deadly snake is hanging on to him!

- In v.4, these superstitious people immediately conclude that Paul is getting his karma – the word for “Justice” is the Gk. word *Dike* = used in the NT for justice or righteousness. But it was also the name of a goddess they worshiped, and they were sure that the goddess was getting even with Paul for his evil deeds.

But isn’t this what most people at this time thought – even the Jews?: bad things happen to bad people. Job’s friends thought that about his suffering, didn’t they? And remember in Jn.9 when Jesus’ own Disciples asked Him, “*Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents that he should be born blind?*”

But these Maltese people were also familiar with the recent work of a Roman writer named Flaccus who wrote about a shipwrecked sailor killed by a snakebite—

- “O, he escaped the storm and the raging of the murderous sea. But as he lay stranded in the libyan sand, not far from the beach and heavy with sleep, at last, naked and destitute, weary as he was from the terrible shipwreck, the viper struck him dead. Why did he struggle against the waves? He did not escape the lot which was destined for him on land (*Palatine Anthology* 7.290).¹

Sounded like Paul, so they thought the same thing just happened to him. But within seconds, they changed their minds when Paul just shook the snake into the fire and went on with his business – then they figured that he must be an invincible god! The same thing happened back in ch.14 to Paul and Barnabas when they were at Lystra – remember that? When they heard Paul speak and saw them heal a lame man they said, “The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!” They called them Zeus and Hermes – until some Jews came and changed their minds, then they decided to try and stone them to death! Idolaters can be a fickle bunch!

Paul and Barnabas tore their clothes and chewed the people out for their idolatry. It doesn’t say that Paul did that here – but I’m sure he at least rolled his eyes – and he probably corrected them and told them about the true God. The point is that God is still protecting Paul on his way to Rome. He is a *God-directed* man, and therefore, He is a *God-protected* man. Nothing is going to take him down until God is through with him, and that is just as true about you and me.

II. Hospitality and healings. (vv.7-10)

- Acts 28:7–10 ⁷Now in the neighborhood of that place were lands belonging to the chief man of the island, named Publius, (he was probably the governor of the island) who received us and entertained us hospitably for three days. (Probably not all 276 of them – maybe he had been told about Paul and the snakebite incident and invited Paul, Luke, and Aristarchus). ⁸It happened that the father of Publius lay sick with fever and dysentery.

We’re pretty sure that we know what Publius’ father had: it was called “Malta fever, and it came from a parasite that was in the milk of Maltese goats. There is a vaccine now, but in Paul’s day it was a serious illness that could last from months to years.—

- And Paul visited him and prayed, and putting his hands on him, healed him. ⁹And when this had taken place, the rest of the people on the island who had diseases also came and were cured.

Paul sounds so much like Jesus here, doesn’t he? He is compassionate over this man’s suffering, and he isn’t afraid to touch him – and he was miraculously healed. Word got out and the people flocked to Paul for healings – and Luke says they were cured – instantaneously and completely.

*The people had thought that Paul was some sort of god, and I believe that God gave Paul the power to perform these miracles to show that his God was the true and Almighty God, with authority over disease – and all the while, Paul is preaching the Gospel of Jesus to these people, So that by the time they left,

¹ Longenecker, R. N. (1981). [The Acts of the Apostles](#). In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: John and Acts* (Vol. 9, p. 564). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

their attention was drawn to the Jesus that Paul preached. He was just the messenger. There is a tradition that says the church on Malta started at this time, and that Publius was its first pastor—

- ¹⁰They also honored us greatly, (I love that response: they didn't worship Paul, but they respected and honored him greatly). and when we were about to sail, they put on board whatever we needed.

So gracious and generous! They stayed on the island through the winter – about 3 months, and by the time they left, they had a warm relationship with these people – and they must have left some brothers and sisters in Christ.

III. Arriving in Rome. (vv.11-16)

- Acts 28:11–16 ¹¹After three months (the winter storm season was over, it's probably around the beginning of February) we set sail in a ship that had wintered in the island, a ship of Alexandria, with the twin gods as a figurehead. (These were sons of Zeus, Castor and Pollux, the gods that supposedly protected mariners)—

Now if you still have your map from last week – after that crazy, violent storm, they actually weren't too far off course by shipwrecking on Malta. From there, they sailed north—

- ¹²Putting in at Syracuse – on the east coast of Sicily – we stayed there for three days. ¹³And from there we made a circuit and arrived at Rhegium – so now they are on the toe of the boot of Italy – And after one day a south wind sprang up, and on the second day we came to Puteoli (now they are about 100 miles from Rome. ¹⁴There we found brothers and were invited to stay with them for seven days.

Every opportunity he gets, Paul gathers with other believers. I guess Paul believed that church is essential. And these saints opened up their homes for Paul, Luke, and Aristarchus – for a full week. And we need to remember that he hadn't been to Italy: these brothers and sisters had never met Paul. He had written his epistle to the Romans, but he had never been there.

But there were Christians there, and there had been Christians in Italy for more than 10 years – we know that because of what we read back in—

- Acts 18:2 ²And he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome.

This happened in 49 A.D. But Aquila and Priscilla were Christians, so why did they have to leave? The Roman historian Seutonius wrote about this: He said that the Emperor Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome because of disturbances instigated by a man named "*Chrestus*." Apparently, he had gotten word about Jews persecuting the followers of "*Christ*," and he kicked out Jews along with Christians, because they were all the same to him! The point here is that there had been Christians in Rome for over 10 years, they had a strong church there, they had Paul's epistle to the Romans, but they had never seen his face—

- And so we came to Rome.

Well actually, Luke is jumping the gun, they haven't made it to Rome yet! They still have a 5 day trip on foot ahead of them. He means, "This is how we came to Rome." The road they are on is the famous Appian Way – it was known as Italy's straightest and best road—

- ¹⁵And the brothers there, when they heard about us, came as far as the Forum of Appius and Three Taverns to meet us.

The brothers from Rome, made this trip to meet up with Paul and escort him back to Rome. The Forum of Appias and Three Taverns were way-stations, like rest stops that were every 15 miles along the Appian Way. Can you imagine how excited these Christians were to meet the famous Apostle Paul! And Paul felt the same way about meeting them – they were his beloved brothers and sisters that he had loved from afar, and now, finally met—

- (15) On seeing them, Paul thanked God and took courage. ¹⁶And when we came into Rome, Paul was allowed to stay by himself, with the soldier who guarded him.

So Paul is under house arrest: people can come and go, but Paul has to stay put, chained by his right wrist to a Roman soldier, 24/7. It could be that he stayed in the home of Aquila and Priscilla or another Christian there. But he only gives himself 3 days to recuperate—he wanted to get his legal situation resolved so he can get on with preaching the Gospel, so he initiated a meeting—

IV. Two meetings with the Jews. (vv.17-28)

A. First meeting.

- Acts 28:17–28 ¹⁷After 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. ¹⁸When they had examined me, they wished to set me at liberty, because there was no reason for the death penalty in my case. ¹⁹But because the Jews objected, I was compelled to appeal to Caesar—though I had no charge to bring against my nation. ²⁰For 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."

You notice that his story hasn't changed: he has broken any Jewish laws, he hasn't broken any Roman laws. He was falsely accused, so that left him no choice but to appeal to Caesar. But did you notice what he said in v.19? "*Though I had no charge to bring against my nation*" – you say, "Wait a minute, Paul, you are the accused, not the accuser!" And that's the point he wants to make: after all the Jews had done to him, he still had nothing against them. (And in that day it was a serious thing to bring false charges against someone.) But Paul wasn't seeking revenge.

By the grace of God, he had no animosity toward these people who wanted him dead. He said in Rom. 10:1 that "his heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they would be saved. All he wanted for them was to know Jesus as their Messiah – because that was the hope of Israel! Their response is surprising—

- ²¹And 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. ²²But we desire to hear from you what your views are, for with regard to this sect we know that everywhere it is spoken against."

They had heard nothing from the Jews in Judea about Paul! Well think about it: It's not likely that some Jews had a faster ship and beat Paul to Rome to rat him out! But these Roman Jews must have known about Paul the poster boy for Pharisaic Judaism who converted to Christianity. He was a famous traitor to their faith. And they definitely knew all about "*this sect that was everywhere spoken against.*"

But they are downplaying all of this – why? Well we just saw that 10 years earlier when the Jews – maybe some of them – picked on the Christians –the Emperor threw all of them out of Rome, Jews and Christians. They were allowed to return a few years later, but they don't want a repeat of that fiasco. And this could be why the Jews from Judea never did come to Rome to accuse Paul. They didn't want to stir up any trouble. But all this is from God to give Paul the peace and freedom to share the gospel!

*Beloved, God doesn't just guide Christians and church history, He guides all of secular history, and every unbeliever for the sake of His glory and His purposes.

B. Second meeting.

- ²³When they had appointed a day for him, they came to him at his lodging in greater numbers. (They really wanted to know what this man was all about.) 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.

Morning till evening! Paul would speak as long as anyone would listen. Luke says he expounded, testified, and tried to convince them about Jesus from all the Scriptures. He showed them that the biblical Messiah and the historical Jesus were one and the same Person. He showed them that the Messiah of their OT Scriptures came the first time to suffer and to offer Himself as a sacrifice for the sins of His people – but that He would rise from the dead, to rule and reign over a spiritual kingdom, and one day return to rule over a new heaven and earth. And I want you to notice carefully the response to all of his teaching and exhorting and persuading—

- ²⁴And some were *convinced* by what he said, but others *disbelieved*.

He split the crowd. The Gospel always divides people: some will hear and believe; others will hear the same message and reject it.

*But do you see that Paul was winsome enough (and interesting enough) to keep his crowd from morning until evening. Remember we saw how he always tried to find common ground – he wanted to keep people shaking their heads, "Yes, that's true, I see what you mean." You and I know Christians who can't talk for 5 minutes without offending people and driving them away. That wasn't Paul. He wanted to *win* people more than he wanted to win an argument. And I believe he had a yearning, pleading tone when he spoke – He described the way he pleaded with people in—

- 2 Corinthians 5:20 ²⁰Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, *as though God were making an appeal through us*; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

The love of Christ constrained him, didn't it? When you bear witness of Jesus Christ and how He has saved you, can people tell that you care about them? That old saying is so true that *people don't care how much you know until they know how much you care.*

But there was a flip side to Paul's style: it was also so *uncompromising* and so *clear*, that it split the crowd: unbelievers would mock Paul, they would be angry and offended – to the point of wanting to kill him, right? When those Jews walked away from Paul, they knew where they stood – Paul didn't leave that up in the air! The Gospel divides.

*How do you talk to unbelievers about their soul? Do you let them know that there is no neutrality when they hear the Gospel? That if they don't receive Jesus and His salvation – they will perish? Isn't that what John 3:16 says? "God gave His Son . . . so that whoever believes in Him will *not* perish."

Never give unbelievers the impression that they are okay with God if they haven't trusted His Son. I know that is awkward. It's uncomfortable. But God forbid that we do anything to feed the delusion that an unbeliever is okay with God . . .

- Years ago Janice and I went to visit an older man in the hospital. He was very ill, and a nominal Christian, on the fringes of our church. When we brought up where he would spend eternity, he just laughed it off – "Guess I'll see when I get there!" And my wife said, "It's not a joke. We want you to know Jesus as your Savior so you don't have to guess!" I was squirming, but that was love.

The shocking rebuke.

And what Paul said to those who wouldn't believe was shocking—

- ²⁵And 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: ²⁶'Go to this people, and say, "You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive."²⁷For 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.

Paul quotes from Isa.6 which was repeated by Jesus in Matt.13, where He explained why two people could hear the same Gospel message, and some would receive it and find eternal life, while others would reject it and be lost.

So follow me: Paul now applies this passage to the Jewish people who have had almost 30 years to come to grips with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It came to them first! It came with power, with signs and wonders, and thousands of *them* were transformed and saved. But most of the nation rejected their Messiah and His Gospel. So the judgment of God was now on Israel for their unbelief. And there would be two results, one very bad, one, very good—

1.) A hardening of their hearts.

The Jewish people, as a whole, would be hardened to the Gospel—

- Romans 11:8 ⁸as it is written, "God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that would not see and ears that would not hear, down to this very day."
- 2 Corinthians 3:14–15 ¹⁴But their minds were hardened. For to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. ¹⁵Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts.

This should sound shocking to us, but it's a spiritual principle that *the consequences of refusing to listen when God speaks, is losing your ability to hear when God speaks.*

But this would also mean something very good for the rest of the world—

2.) A Gospel opportunity for the Gentiles.

- Acts 28:28 ²⁸Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; *they* will listen."

God was turning *from* the Jews, *to* the Gentiles: it used to be that God's people were mostly Jews, some Gentiles, but now the church would be mostly Gentiles, with few Jews. Listen to Paul—

- Romans 11:25 I do not want you to be unaware of this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.
- Romans 11:17 . . . some of the branches were broken off, and you, although a wild olive shoot, were grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing root of the olive tree.

I.e., this present age we live in is the great opportunity for all the nations to become a part of God's people through trusting Christ. And Paul goes on to say in Rom.11, that the day will come when many in Israel are grafted back into tree through faith in Christ. (Another sermon)

V. "With all boldness and without hindrance." (vv.30-31)

- Acts 28:30–31 ³⁰He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all (I think that was Jews and Gentiles) who came to him, ³¹proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.

What a great ending to this story! It kinda leaves us hanging: some Bible scholars ask why Luke ends the story here – hello, you can only fit so much onto one scroll, ok? But he leaves Paul with an incredible jail ministry.

He had an endless stream of Christian friends who met his needs, and gave him the freedom to "proclaim and teach" = *kerusso* and *didasko* = preaching and teaching – passionate monologue and two-way dialogue. Hasn't that been Paul's method all along? And can I tell you that we do the same thing here at MBC? I proclaim God's Word during the sermon (next week it will be Dr. Mike Canham!), and we dialogue about God's Word during Sunday School. And for spiritual growth, we all need both: we need to sit and listen, under the preaching of God's Word. But we also need to be able to ask questions and dig deeper the way we do in Sunday School, or Bible studies, like our Saturday men's study. Please make the effort to come to these studies.

Final thoughts on Acts.

Jesus promised in the first chapter of Acts that He would use His people to spread His Gospel to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and even to the ends of the earth. At the end of ch.28, it's all happened just as Jesus said it would. There was never any doubt, right? And in the last chapters we saw the invisible hand of God's providence guiding every circumstance to get Paul where He wanted him to be, to do exactly what He wanted him to do. But the *way* God did this is surprising and unexpected—

He brought Paul safely to Rome, but he brought him there as a prisoner, in chains!

- And God was sovereign over both. Right? We said it last week: God is sovereign over the end, and He is sovereign over the means to the end. It was God’s will to get Paul to Rome, and it was also God’s will to get him there via several arrests, beatings, murder plots, shipwrecks and snakebites!

So we reach the end of this amazing story, and Paul has reached Rome, and he’s preaching the Gospel to all who come, with all boldness and without hindrance –as a prisoner, in chains!

And that was God’s perfect will for Paul! Didn’t we say that God’s richest blessings often – how often? – come to His children marvelously disguised as miserable trials? And how often do we look back and praise Him for the storms and trials and the valleys He brought us through to get us to where we are? And we say, “God’s way was perfect. I wouldn’t change a thing.”

So let me show you 3 reasons why it was God’s will for Paul to preach the Gospel as a prisoner in chains —

1.) It expanded Paul’s ministry.

We know from the letters Paul wrote while he was a prisoner that there was a constant flow of people visiting him. He mentions Epaphras from Colossae, John Mark, Demas, Onesimus, a runaway slave who got saved while visiting Paul. And all of this was happening right under Nero’s nose. He wrote to the Philippians during time, and he was so excited!—

- Philippians 1:12–14 ¹²I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel (!), ¹³so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. ¹⁴And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.

i.e., Nero’s personal Secret Service were talking about the Gospel! And the believers in Rome had more courage than ever to witness. Paul signs off this letter by making this amazing statement—

- Philippians 4:21–22 ²¹Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The brothers who are with me greet you. ²²All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar’s household.

What? Some of Nero’s servants, possibly his family – had become believers. Amazing. And let me remind that you that Jesus promised that Paul would stand before Caesar, so even though Luke doesn’t mention it, we know it happened. And we also know that Paul would have taken that opportunity to proclaim Christ – to Nero!

All of this is because the good providence of God included Paul being a prisoner in chains.

2.) It was a period of incredible ministry.

Paul wasn’t just lying on a cot reading “Our Daily Bread” for two years. He had nothing but time on his hands, and he was amazingly productive. It was during this time that he wrote his “Prison Epistles,” *Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon* – and aren’t those some of your favorite books of the Bible? And let me tell you why—

- They exalt Christ's Lordship, and His deity like no other letters – God gave Paul this time to meditate on the glory of Christ: In **Ephesians** Paul exalts Jesus as head over every spiritual power and authority, and as Head of the church, His body, the fullness of Him fills all in all. In **Philippians** he exalts Jesus for taking on our flesh and our humanity, and for being given a name that is above every name in heaven and on earth. In **Colossians** he exalts Jesus as Creator, the One in whom all the fullness of deity dwells in bodily form. He is the image of the invisible God!

And we love these letters because they breathe contentment, don't they? He's not anxious, he's not resentful – he is overflowing with joy, and telling Christians on the outside they need to "Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I will say, Rejoice!" He never even asks for prayer that he would be released, because he is so perfectly content with God's will for him. The dear saints in Philippi wrote to ask Paul what they could do for him. This is what he said—

- Philippians 4:10–13 ¹⁰I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity. ¹¹Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. ¹²I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. ¹³I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

"I'm good. Because God's good."

3.) Paul's sufferings authenticated his ministry.

Nothing proves the sincerity of our faith like our willingness to suffer for what we believe. So Paul *had* to suffer, and be *seen* to suffer, for the gospel he was preaching. Some of you know that the Gk. word for *witness* is the same as the word for *martyr*. Jesus said that it's the seed that *dies* that bears much fruit.

You show how much you value something by what you are willing to pay for it. And Paul was ready to die for the Gospel, wasn't he? He didn't just say that, he demonstrated it over and over and over. And not everyone he preached to *believed* his gospel, but I don't read of anyone who doubted that *he* believed it!

So the good and perfect will of God for Paul's life included much suffering – but also much fruit for the Gospel of Jesus. You and I are Christians today because Paul took the Gospel to the nations – and 2,000 years later, it reached us!

- You see where I'm going with all of this: the same is true for you and me: God's good and perfect will includes trials, and pain, and also and times of unspeakable joy, and fellowship, and precious service for Jesus. Don't let the ongoing trials and tests of life steal that joy and sideline you. Don't judge the end of the story by the middle of the story: You are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works which He prepared for you to do, for His glory, before time began. Hang tough. Don't lose heart.

This week we received an email from our dear friend Nilo over in the Philippines. Here is a man who has suffered like few men I've known. But God has used him to train and send out literally hundreds of men to preach the Gospel in the Philippines and beyond. And even though he's past the expiration date for a Filipino, he keeps preaching, teaching, and exhorting Christians with every ounce of energy God gives him. This is the way he ended his email—

I am convinced this pandemic is no excuse to stay unproductive in the service of the Master. In fact it presented possibilities that I have never imagined possible before. One of our Elders is doing Bible study with his siblings who are scattered around the globe using the technology available! If the Lord Jesus came in our time He would surely use every technology available to further His kingdom!

I firmly believe the Lord Jesus Christ is "up to something big" as a result of this pandemic. What it is? I do not know. But this I know; my God is Lord over all and no pandemic can stop Him from accomplishing His purposes. I need only to follow and obey Him one step at a time, and trust that He can use a crooked stick to draw a straight line. He reigns! Let all the nations be glad! In His presence there is joy forever more!