

Acts 28:1-31. Power Without Hindrance

In Chapter 27 of the book of Acts, Paul was accompanied by Luke, Aristarchus, and Julius, a Roman Centurion as he was being taken by ship to Rome to exercise his right of appeal before Caesar. Traveling on the Mediterranean Sea in the late Fall was dangerous, and they (and the other 270 passengers) found themselves overpowered by the wind and waves, not knowing where they were being driven, and doubtful of their survival. Paul was given a message from the LORD that they would all survive, though the ship would be lost. Being driven toward land, they tried to beach the ship, but instead struck rocks that damaged the hull. As the ship broke up, the passengers swam for shore. All who were on board the ship survived. This alone was a miracle of note, and fulfilled Paul's prophecy of their survival.

Acts 28:1. *And when they were escaped, then they knew that the island was called Melita.*

Malta is a large island about 70 miles south of Sicily, a very large island off the "boot" of Italy. It is interesting to note that despite the storm's power and potential to drive them to the coast of Egypt or Libya, they were actually driven in the direction of their intended travel. Some could argue that during this time of the year, the winds would be coming from the Northwest, and were described as such in Chapter 27. Herein we already see two significant instances where God was working to accomplish his purpose. First, God provided a safe place to winter, a place that was in the proximity of their intended journey to Rome. Second, not only was Paul's life saved in the shipwreck, but the survival of everyone on board was a testimony to God's intended purpose.

Acts 28:2. *And the barbarous people showed us no little kindness: for they kindled a fire, and received us every one, because of the present rain, and because of the cold.*

The weather was obviously miserable. They had been driven to shore and shipwrecked because of the storm. The late Fall, early Winter season would be very cold and damp, so every person who came ashore would have been

suffering from hypothermia and exhaustion. Malta is not a small island, and has a reasonably large population. News of the shipwreck would have spread quickly, and the people of the island came out in the miserable weather in order to help the stricken travelers.

The KJV refers to the people of Malta as barbarous, or barbarians. They spoke neither Roman or Greek, so to the Greeks foreign languages sounded like gibberish. The cliché for this gibberish was a repetition of the sound, "bar-bar," hence, the word "barbarian." Literally, it means foreigner, and though many Greeks felt that foreigners were of a lower class than themselves, the true form of the word does not imply any strata of social class, simply foreign culture. Furthermore, applied in the Hebrew, this word is rendered as "Gentile." We should always be aware of the "foreigners" who are around us as we are called by God to be salt and light on their behalf.

Acts 28:3-6. *And when Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks, and laid them on the fire, there came a viper out of the heat, and fastened on his hand. ⁴And when the barbarians saw the venomous beast hang on his hand, they said among themselves, No doubt this man is a murderer, whom, though he hath escaped the sea, yet vengeance suffereth not to live. ⁵And he shook off the beast into the fire, and felt no harm. ⁶Howbeit they looked when he should have swollen, or fallen down dead suddenly: but after they had looked a great while, and saw no harm come to him, they changed their minds, and said that he was a god.*

This passage shows God's power again demonstrated on Paul's behalf, as it was God's purpose that Paul would testify to Caesar. Though there are no poisonous snakes on the island of Malta at this time, it is quite obvious that there were during Paul's day, since the islanders were quite accustomed with the deadly consequences from a bite from the snake they had witnessed. The bite is further described as most deadly, since the snake actually held its bite and hung from Paul's hand. Paul responded by reaching over the fire and placing the snake into the flames.

When this happened the islanders thought that Paul had to have been a murderer, because in their ignorance, they like so many during these pre-science

years, believed suffering or misfortune to be a sin penalty. Then, when Paul was unaffected by the bite, they assumed he must be some kind of god. We may look at their response to witnessing the power of God as being extremely ignorant and unreasonable. The truth is simple: they do not know the truth, and can only interpret their surroundings upon that which they already know. Many of those around us also do not know the truth, and the disparity in their worldview and ours is just as great. The Maltese did not understand how Paul could have survived, so could only explain the event by attributing to him some kind of superpower over the snake. They simply misapplied the power, attributing it to Paul rather than to the one true God. This event would open the door for Paul to preach the truth to the Maltese. Likewise, we should look for every opportunity to dispel the ignorance of the "Gentiles" around us.

Acts 28:7-10. *In the same quarters were possessions of the chief man of the island, whose name was Publius; who received us, and lodged us three days courteously. ⁸And it came to pass, that the father of Publius lay sick of a fever and of a bloody flux: to whom Paul entered in, and prayed, and laid his hands on him, and healed him. ⁹So when this was done, others also, which had diseases in the island, came, and were healed: ¹⁰Who also honoured us with many honours; and when we departed, they laded us with such things as were necessary.*

Not only did God deliver the passengers and crew of the shipwreck safely on an island that was in the proximity of their intended travel, they shipwrecked in the "backyard" of Publius, the chief official of the island. Publius hosted several of the travelers for a few days at his estate, including Paul, Luke, and most likely Aristarchus and the ship's captain. This invitation serves to illustrate the respect that Paul had already established among the passengers, crew, and now the Maltese. The Spirit of God that lived in Paul lived through him, and was recognized, though not understood, by those around him. Likewise people should be able to see the open working of the Holy Spirit in the lives of all who have placed their faith and trust in God.

The working of the Spirit in the life of a Christian is demonstrated when they minister to others. Upon learning that the father of Publius was suffering, Paul responded with compassion. He went to him, prayed over him on his behalf, and

laid hands on him. As a consequence, God miraculously healed him. Paul continued this healing ministry during the three months that they stayed on the island. This gave Paul opportunity to share the gospel with everyone on the island. Though the scripture does not explicitly say, it is quite apparent that one consequence of the storm and the shipwreck was the salvation of many on the island of Malta because of the obedience of one Christian who yielded himself to the Power of the Holy Spirit.

Acts 28:11-16. *And after three months we departed in a ship of Alexandria, which had wintered in the isle, whose sign was Castor and Pollux. ¹²And landing at Syracuse, we tarried there three days. ¹³And from thence we fetched a compass, and came to Rhegium: and after one day the south wind blew, and we came the next day to Puteoli: ¹⁴Where we found brethren, and were desired to tarry with them seven days: and so we went toward Rome. ¹⁵And from thence, when the brethren heard of us, they came to meet us as far as Appiiforum, and The three taverns: whom when Paul saw, he thanked God, and took courage. ¹⁶And when we came to Rome, the centurion delivered the prisoners to the captain of the guard: but Paul was suffered to dwell by himself with a soldier that kept him.*

Paul and his entourage left Malita after three months. They still had several hundred miles of sailing and about 140 miles of walking yet to complete in order to arrive in Rome. Their trip up the Italian west coast went by rather quickly. Somehow word had gotten to Rome that Paul was coming, and some of the Roman Christians set out on the Appius road to meet them. They came to meet them somewhere between 40 and 50 miles South of Rome, a considerable distance to travel on foot, and a testimony to their respect for Paul.

The statement "We came to Rome.." is almost an understatement that attributes little to the significant events that took place on the trip there. Julius, the Centurion who had the responsibility of delivering Paul to Rome had completed his mission, delivering Paul to the captain of the Roman guard. Paul's imprisonment was still more of the style of a house arrest rather than a jail arrest. Paul was permitted to rent a house wherein he would stay, and was assigned a single guard to keep watch over him.

Acts 28:17a. *And it came to pass, that after three days Paul called the chief of the Jews together:*

Upon arrival in Rome, Paul found himself under house arrest. He could not continue his ministry using the same methods he had used in the past. Paul had developed a well-defined pattern as he would enter a new community. He would go to the Synagogue to preach the gospel, a gospel that was the fulfillment of Judaism, not a competitor with it. He would preach that Jesus Christ was the long-awaited Messiah who would come and save His people. Paul could not do this in Rome, as much as he would have wanted to, so he did the next best thing: he called the leaders of the synagogues to his “new” home. We can easily observe that Paul often adapted his methods to match the context of his situation. On Mars Hill he preached to the philosophers by using one of their own icons to point to Jesus.¹ As tempted as we might be to exercise a single approach to sharing the Gospel, the context of the situation wherein we are called to share is always changing. Paul changed his methods to match the situation: he called the people to come to him.

Acts 28:17b-20. *And it came to pass, that after three days Paul called the chief of the Jews together: and when they were come together, he said unto them, Men and brethren, though I have committed nothing against the people, or customs of our fathers, yet was I delivered prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans. ¹⁸Who, when they had examined me, would have let me go, because there was no cause of death in me. ¹⁹But when the Jews spake against it, I was constrained to appeal unto Caesar; not that I had ought to accuse my nation of. ²⁰For this cause therefore have I called for you, to see you, and to speak with you: because that for the hope of Israel I am bound with this chain.*

Paul does not waste any time. He has only been in Rome three days and he is already communicating his testimony to the Jewish leaders of the Roman synagogues. We see a lot of similarity between his defense to these as he gave to Festus and Agrippa. However, his testimony centers around the "Hope of Israel," appropriate for his Jewish audience. These Jewish leaders are familiar with the Law and the Prophets, and using a model similar to that used by Jesus

¹ Acts 17:22.

on the road to Emmaus, Paul seeks to show those who know the prophecy what the meaning of that prophecy is: the Hope of Israel is none other than Jesus, the Messiah, the Christ, the incarnation of YAHWEH, Himself.

Acts 28:21-22. *And they said unto him, We neither received letters out of Judaea concerning thee, neither any of the brethren that came showed or spake any harm of thee. ²²But we desire to hear of thee what thou thinkest: for as concerning this sect, we know that every where it is spoken against.*

Many commentators find it surprising that these religious leaders feign ignorance of Paul and the controversy of his ministry amongst the more conservative Jews. They state that they are familiar with the "sect" that is criticized by their Jewish brothers. One cannot forget the purge against Christians that took place in AD 49, the action that caused Aquila and Priscilla to leave Rome and meet Paul on his second missionary journey. They ministered in Ephesus during Paul's time there prior to their returning to Rome after the purge ended. These religious leaders would be familiar with Christianity through that event, at least. Though the Christian community knew of Paul and the fact that he was coming to Rome, it is reasonable that the Jewish leadership would not have heard. They separated themselves from the non-Jewish community and had little reason to have interest in it. However, now that Paul is here, he has brought them an opportunity to understand this "sect" a little better.

Acts 28:23-24. *And when they had appointed him a day, there came many to him into his lodging; to whom he expounded and testified the kingdom of God, persuading them concerning Jesus, both out of the law of Moses, and out of the prophets, from morning till evening. ²⁴And some believed the things which were spoken, and some believed not.*

Their first meeting appears to have been relatively short. At that meeting they arranged for a second opportunity to meet when more people could come to the house that Paul was renting. When they arrived, Paul spent the entire day preaching the gospel within the context of Jewish understanding, illustrating from the Law and the Prophets that Jesus is the Messiah. There was one difference in their response from those of the other similar opportunities that Paul had to

share the gospel in a new city. In other cases where he was sharing in the Synagogues, the religious leaders would perceive that he was subject to its authority. Consequently, when they disagreed with him in the Synagogues, they would respond violently, expelling him from the grounds. In this case, they are in Paul's house, and there is no such motive for controversy. If they disagree with Paul, they can simply leave. There would be no thought of his controversial statements damaging the sanctity of the Synagogue. Consequently, their response was mixed, but very calm.

The scripture describes their response as bipolar: some were convinced, others were not. The scripture does reveal that some of these respected Jewish men were convinced by Paul of the truth of his doctrine. However, no indication is given that any actually turned their lives over to Christ. This brings out an important point. Many people are convinced that there is a God. They are convinced that Jesus is His Son, was crucified, died, and was buried, and on the third day he rose again, victorious over death. They believe that He died for their sins, and even that through Him atonement can be found. However, like these Jewish leaders, they are convinced in their minds of the truth, but have not appropriated it for themselves. Even the demons believe the truth of the gospel, and they tremble.² It is plausible to speculate that some of the Jewish leaders believed what Paul was saying was true, but they failed to place their faith and trust in Jesus Christ, and by doing so, failed to appropriate for themselves that grace that God has made available to us.

We must always be sensitive when we speak of the gospel to listen to the hearer and make sure that they have gained more than "head knowledge," and have taken the step of giving their lives over to Jesus and trusting Him for their own salvation.

Acts 28:25-29. *And when they agreed not among themselves, they departed, after that Paul had spoken one word, Well spake the Holy Ghost by Esaias the prophet unto our fathers, ²⁶Saying, Go unto this people, and say, Hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing ye shall see, and not perceive: ²⁷For the heart of this people is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes have they closed; lest they should see with their eyes, and hear with their*

² James 2:19.

ears, and understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them. ²⁸Be it known therefore unto you, that the salvation of God is sent unto the Gentiles, and that they will hear it. ²⁹And when he had said these words, the Jews departed, and had great reasoning among themselves.

Those who disagreed with Paul began to argue among themselves. Their entire careers were characterized by their rote learning of scripture and their cold, powerless repetition of pre-written prayers. Tradition played such a large part in their lives that nothing took place without it. When they shared the Law and Prophets with one another they were merely Godly words that sounded good, and would give a warm and fuzzy feeling, but had no power. When Paul spoke from the Law and the Prophets, he spoke with a power that was not of the scribes, just as was stated of Jesus' sharing of Old Testament scripture.

When a Christian teaches God's Word, they appropriate that same power. Several times when sharing the Gospel, the hearer has later told of the power in the word that they experienced for the first time in that encounter. Some have described it as "lights turning on," or "you just lit up." In a world searching for answers, Christians have the confidence that God's word is reliable and true.

However, to those whose hearts are hardened by their adamant rejection of God's authority, no such power is perceived. Paul recalled Isaiah 6:9-10 as he repeated the prophet's description of the manner in which the children of Abraham would reject the Messiah and the true healing that He brings.

Acts 28:30-31. And Paul dwelt two whole years in his own hired house, and received all that came in unto him, ³¹Preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching those things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ, with all confidence, no man forbidding him.

Nothing more is said about those who rejected the message that day. Luke does record that Paul, though under house arrest, continued for two years to preach the gospel to all who would come to him, and one can speculate that these were not a small number of people. Paul took the message to all, and did not dwell on those who rejected it, but rather developed ministry around those who did. Paul

never seemed to be too concerned that his message was not universally received, and he praised God for those who did receive it.

In the book of Acts we see find unleashing of God's power through the Holy Spirit. We are given the example of Paul's life as he went from persecuting the church to being its primary missionary. In it we see how God's Holy Spirit filled those who chose to follow Christ in obedience and empowered them to ministry. We see Jesus' Great Commission of Matthew 28:18 carried out as people throughout the region surrounding the eastern Mediterranean Sea were brought into the Kingdom of God and disciplined.

One of the great questions that always comes up when we approach the close of the book of Acts surrounds its abrupt ending. We finish chapter 28 hoping to turn the page and see how the drama in Paul's life ends. Consequently, people have speculated about Paul's remaining years. However, the message in the book of Acts is not about Paul, it is about the Power of the Holy Spirit as He empowers the early church. In its pages we find instruction in ministry through both teaching and example. We also gain an understanding of their culture in a way that helps us to understand its words and their application.

As for Paul, there is no conclusive documentation that hints at a defensible history of his remaining experiences. We can surmise that, based upon the evidence of the unfolding of God's plan in Paul's life that he did get the opportunity to plead his case with Caesar, and most likely (based upon previous experience in Roman court and the lack of documentation), his case was thrown out and he was released. His stated desire to take the gospel to Spain may have drawn him to complete his life in that country. At the end of Paul's second letter to Timothy he alludes to the immanence of his being taken to trial. The traditional position is that which is published in Foxe's Book of Martyrs:

Paul, the apostle, who before was called Saul, after his great travail and unspeakable labors in promoting the Gospel of Christ, suffered also in this first persecution under Nero. Abdias, declareth that under his execution Nero sent two of his esquires, Ferega and Parthemius, to bring him word of his death. They, coming to Paul instructing the people, desired him to pray for them, that they might believe; who told them that shortly after they should believe and be baptised at His sepulcher. This done, the soldiers

came and led him out of the city to the place of execution, where he, after his prayers made, gave his neck to the sword.

Where history records the deaths of the Apostles, they all share the common experience of martyrdom. Most likely, Paul did die a martyr's death. However, in his life God used him to demonstrate that the Power of His Holy Spirit cannot be encumbered, only expressed. We learned that God has, by his grace, given to us His Holy Spirit to live in us, providing us with infinite resources as we seek to follow Him in obedience. Let us never forget that gift, and by continuing to yield ourselves to Him daily we will become more like Paul as he admonished, and more like Christ as He commanded.

