

Study 40: Acts 28

Introduction

Paul finally began his journey to Rome. Without the Divine revelation from God, he would most certainly have doubted whether he was ever going to get there. He moved from the position of being *one of the prisoners* – although he may never have been just that (since Julius allowed him to take shore leave at Sidon) – to being *the leader* in the predicament where everyone had lost everything but their lives.

Timing: *When did these events occur?*

Content: *What are the major events?*

Cast: *Who are the major players?*

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Why does Paul summons the Jews?

What does Paul teach the Jews when they come to him?

What happens to Paul?

Homework:

Read the notes as a review of the study.

- *How do you think that Paul might have regarded the house arrest, compared to the freedom that he has had in the past?*
- *How did Paul accomplish his mission in the gospel, even although he was under arrest? How effective might he have been if he had been free? In what ways was he more effective whilst under arrest?*

Read the introduction, timing, content, and cast of the notes of chapters 13 to 28 in preparation for next week

Notes for study 40: Acts chapter 28

Introduction

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Timing: *When did these events occur?*

The chapter begins with the shipwreck around October AD 60. The wait in Malta took 3 months over winter, and then the journey to Rome took the best part of another month. This places Paul arriving in Rome in late February or early March of AD 61. Paul lived in Rome under house arrest for another two years, which places the close of the book of Acts around early to mid year of AD 63.

Content: *What are the major events?*

The shipwrecked people safely land at Malta; Paul is bitten by a snake but suffers no harm; Publius' father healed by Paul, and many other also; Winter on the island for 3 months; Journey to Rome; Paul meets with the Jews; Paul's 2 year house arrest in Rome.

Cast: *Who are the major players?*

Paul, Publius, Jews in Rome.

Body of the Study

The landing at Malta

Malta was originally a Phoenician colony, and the Greek name *Melita* was originally given to it by the Phoenician sailors. It is about 30 km long by about 12 km wide, and about 95 km South of Sicily and 300 km North of the African coast. It was prosperous and its native population spoke a Phoenician dialect, though Latin and Greek was probably well known.

The travellers really had no idea where they were after having been in a granddaddy of a storm for two weeks and unable to navigate for directions. But "...*Once safely on shore, we found out that the island was called Malta...*" (28:1 NIV). The Maltese inhabitants may well have watched the ship being driven onto the beach, but when they landed (or soon after) the inhabitants must have arrived in droves, and responded with a great deal of kindness towards them. The word *barbarians* (KJV) merely indicates that they did not speak Greek, Latin, or Hebrew – not that they were savages, uncultured, or cruel.

The shipwreck survivors would have been cold and soaking wet from their ordeal in the winter waters. They were soon shown hospitality "...*the natives showed us no unusual kindness; for they kindled a fire and made us all welcome, because of the rain that was falling and because of the cold...*" (28:2 NKJV). Having 276 shipwreck survivors arrive for the winter, with no supplies, would have placed a considerable burden on the people of the island.

Why does Paul's position become prominent?

Paul was doing his share of the work helping gather fuel for the fire. The word translated *bundle of sticks* (NKJV) or "*brushwood*" (NIV) literally means "dry sticks", "Kindling wood", "straw", "stubble" or any combustible material. It includes the stout thorny heather that grows near St Paul's Bay at Malta. "...*Paul gathered a pile of brushwood and, as he put it on the fire, a viper, driven out by the heat, fastened itself on his hand...*" (28:3 NIV).

The poison viper that lives in the Mediterranean is reputedly one of the deadliest amongst the snake family. The viper attached itself to Paul's hand, and he shook it off into the fire. A viper would normally attack without attaching itself to the victim, and the fact that it hung on

on this occasion may be the providence of God working to ensure that all of those who were there saw exactly what had happened to Paul from his very first arrival on Malta.

Some writers have suggested that the snake was not poisonous (in support of this, they assert that poisonous ones strike without attaching themselves). However Dr Luke – who as a physician would be familiar with snakebite – uses the regular term for a poisonous snake (*therion*). The locals who were there and observed what happened would also be very familiar with the snakes, and they were all expecting Paul to die as a result of the snakebite. They believed that Paul must have been a murderer, and the snakebite was the goddess “Justice” – the daughter of Jupiter whose duty it was to bring vengeance and inflict punishment for crimes – revenging him for surviving the shipwreck. They would have observed the soldier(s) guarding Paul, and therefore recognised him as a prisoner. “...*So when the natives saw the creature hanging from his hand, they said to one another “No doubt this man is a murderer, whom, though he has just escaped the sea, yet justice does not allow to live”...*” (28:4 NKJV)

The locals were watching Paul, and waited for the signs of the snakebite to take effect, but it didn’t happen “...*The people expected him to swell up or suddenly fall dead, but after waiting a long time and seeing nothing unusual happen to him, they changed their minds...*” (28:6 NIV). Dr Luke describes this using a medical term for *nothing unusual*, (*medeis-atopos*) which can mean either no “unusual symptoms” or “fatal consequences”. As a result of their observation, rather than concluding that the snake might not have been venomous, they concluded that Paul himself “...*was a god...*”. Paul and Barnabas had been thought to be gods at Lystra (14:8-18) and Paul had to teach them otherwise. Although Luke did not record it, Paul had a perfect opportunity to teach the locals on the beach at Malta that he was not a god, but that he was saved by the power of the true and living God....

How did Paul’s fame spread?

Paul’s survival of the snakebite was soon recognised by the locals, and no doubt his reputation spread. Paul and Luke were looked after for the short time of 3 days, by one of the leading men of the land “...*whose name was Publius, who received us and entertained us courteously for three days...*” (28:7 NKJV). They were soon made aware of his father’s serious illness.

Publius is described as a “*legate*” meaning *leading man*, and was an official title that was technically correct for Malta – which was a part of the province of Sicily and ruled under a procurator. Again Luke shows the exact accuracy of his terminology in describing the political officers that he came across.

Publius’ father “...*lay sick of a fever and dysentery...*” (28:8 NKJV). Dr Luke uses the correct medical term (*dysentery*) to describe the condition. “...*Paul went in to see him and, after prayer, placed his hands on him and healed him...*” (28:8 NIV). This follows the same general process that had been done on previous occasions (Dorcas 9:36; Eutychus 20:10).

- Paul prayed
- He laid his hands on him
- The sick man was healed

Paul had been on the island for less than a week, and had already obtained a reputation of fame, not only with the people generally, but with *the leading man* of the island. The path was now clear for Paul to continue his work to heal the sick, and to preach the gospel to them. “...*So when this was done, the rest of those on the island who had diseases also came and were healed...*” (28:9 NKJV). Paul and Luke were on the island for three months, and the fertile ground to preach the gospel during that time had been nourished and developed during the first week of the visit.

Paul’s work (and Luke’s as a physician) amongst the people certainly drew respect and honour from the people. So much so, that when the time came to leave, the people saw to it that they had everything that they needed “...*they also honoured us in many ways; and when we departed, they provided such things as were necessary...*” (28:10 NKJV). Whilst this may be due to their gratitude for having been healed of their sicknesses, it is more likely because of the salvation in Christ that had been brought to their island.

Here we see a wonderful example of God working through the events of Paul and Luke's lives. They were shipwrecked on an unknown island, they lost everything they had but none of the 276 people on board died. Immediately God's miraculous power was demonstrated through Paul, who had the opportunity to preach the gospel before he even left the beach where they had landed. They were billeted to the leading man on the island, and after only 3 days God healed his father through Paul. Their fame spread quickly throughout the island. As the people come from near and far to be healed, Paul preached to and taught them. Their stay on the island for three months gave sufficient time for the brethren to be established in the faith (and of course, they would have been endowed with the miraculous gifts which enabled them to have divine revelation on what God wanted for them in matters of faith and practice).

The journey to Italy

After successfully wintering on the island of Malta for a period of 3 months, it was time to move on. Another ship (probably another grain ship) had also wintered on the island, and was about to leave for Italy. "...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..." (28:11 NIV). The ship had the name *twin brothers* (NKJV), or *Castor and Pollux* (KJV / NIV). In Greek mythology, Zeus and Leda had twin sons *Castor and Pollux*. After their death they were supposed to have been translated by Zeus into the heavens to become the constellation Gemini. Neptune wanted to honour them and gave them power over the winds and the waves, and so they became the gods of sailors. Here we see an example of the interaction of the pagan religion into the daily lives of the 1st century missionaries. It is also another example of the detail that Luke gives in his accurate historical record.

The trip to Syracuse is about 130 km, and would have been about a day's journey. "...and landing at Syracuse, we stayed three days..." (28:12 NKJV). The 3-day stop would most likely have been to take on fresh supplies, and perhaps sell some of the grain.

Syracuse is on the island of Sicily, and would have been much better equipped to supply the needs of the ship and the passengers who had lost everything. From there they sailed to Rhegium and then to Puteoli. There are some variations in the manuscripts as to whether this was a straight journey or took a circuitous route. They had to spend a little time at Rhegium (at the toe of Italy) awaiting a favourable wind. The journey to Puteoli took another 2 days. The distance is about 300 km so they must have had very favourable conditions.

In all, it took just over a week to travel from Malta.

The final journey to Rome

The arrival of the first grain ship in the Bay of Naples would have brought much rejoicing to the Italian people. But perhaps even more for the passengers on the ship who had to endure the painful travels, the shipwreck, and then the winter in Malta. How many of them became Christians during that time? What about Paul's guardian, Julius? With such a very close association with Paul for a long time it would seem almost inevitable that he did – and if not, then he has no excuse when he stands before God on the day of judgement.

On arrival at Puteoli "...we found brethren, and were invited to stay with them for seven days..." (28:14 NKJV). Luke gives us a small note that tells us just how far the church had spread over the previous 25 years since the dispersion. But how had the gospel arrived here? Paul's visit is the first (that we know about) of an evangelist or apostle to Italy. Pompeii is not very far away, and was destroyed in AD 79 (18 years after Paul's arrival here). There is evidence of Christianity amongst the ruins within the city – although it must be remembered that it could well have flourished as a result of Paul's work in Italy.

After spending 7 days in Puteoli with the brethren (which must have included a *first day of the week*), they then headed off to Rome. Paul would no doubt have strengthened the disciples with his visit, and endowed them with the miraculous gifts to ground them in the faith – just like he said that he wanted to do to the brethren at Rome (Rom 1:11). "...The brothers there had heard that we were coming, and they travelled as far as the Forum of Appius and the Three Taverns to meet us..." (28:15 NIV).

The trip to Rome was 250 km on the Appian Way, and would have been a walk of 3 to 5 days. During the stay at Puteoli, word had gone ahead that Paul was there, and on his way to Rome. Some of the brethren had come out on the way to meet Paul and Luke. If Aristarchus had not accompanied Paul all the way to Rome, and had returned home to Thessalonica, then he would have travelled on the coastal ship back to Adramyttium, and then to Thessalonica. During the time of Paul's shipwreck voyage (2 weeks) and the winter on Malta (3 months), word would have reached the brethren in Rome that Paul was on his way. So, Paul's arrival would have been anticipated. The word came that he was at Puteoli and on his way. Some of the brethren may have included Aquilla and Priscilla, and many of the others that Paul had addressed by name when he wrote Rom 16 from Corinth three years earlier.

At the *market of Appius (Appai forum)* and *the village of three inns* about 80 km and 50 km from Rome, Paul met the brethren who had come to meet him. Apparently two groups of brethren had come, and hence the meeting in two different places.

The reaction from Paul was one of thankfulness, and courage. "...*When Paul saw them, he thanked God and took courage...*" (28:15 NKJV). Paul was reassured by the greeting. It had been some time since he last had any contact with them, and he must have been wondering what sort of welcome he would get.

The arrival at Rome

Luke accompanied Paul on the journey to Rome (his use of "we" in vs 16 "...*Now when we came to Rome...*"), but this is his last use of the term in the book of Acts. So Luke and Paul must have been separated for a time. However, Paul says that Luke was with him when he wrote the letters to Philemon (vs 24), and to the church at Colossae (4:14).

Upon their arrival in Rome, Paul was delivered to the captain of the guard. (KJV / NKJV). Some have questioned who this person was, but the Roman historian Tacitus tells us that there were usually two prefects (captains) of the Praetorian Guard, but between the years 51 and 62 AD there was only one, and his name was Afrianus Burrus¹. The question is whether it was this position to whom Paul was handed over, or the Captain of another Guard regiment. The Greek text reads with the definite article – "...*the Captain of the Guard...*", not "...*a Captain of the Guard...*" which suggests that the singular position occupied by Afrianus Burrus was the one to which Luke referred.

However "...*Paul was permitted to dwell by himself with the soldier who guarded him...*" (28:16 NKJV). He was treated differently than the other prisoners, many of whom had probably already been condemned and may have been going to entertain the crowds as they faced the lions or the gladiators in the Circus Maximus. On the contrary, Paul came as an uncondemned Roman citizen who had appealed to Caesar. His case came with the letter from Festus that would have been worded favourably (based on Agrippa's summation of the situation in 26:31-32). In addition, there is no doubt that Julius would have given him a good commendation.

The soldier who guarded him would have changed from time to time, and it may be that Paul was physically chained to him (or Paul could have metaphorically used the term *chained* to indicate his lack of freedom). He points to the chain in 28:20 at his initial meeting with the Jewish leaders, which suggests that it was a physical bondage. The soldiers would have heard repeatedly the story of Paul's missionary journeys, his sufferings for Christ, and the story of salvation through Jesus the Messiah. Consequently, Paul tells the Philippians

^{PHP 1:12} Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. ¹³ As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. ¹⁴ Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly. (NIV)

¹ Tacitus, Annals 13:42:1
Study of Acts (Revised 2007) by Graeme Offer

Why does Paul summons the Jews?

Paul had hardly settled in before he called for the Jews to come and listen to him. “...*And it came to pass after three days that Paul called the leaders of the Jews together. So when they had come together, he said to them...*” (28:17 NKJV). Paul’s normal practice was to go to the Jews first. Because of his house arrest, he was unable to go to them, but that did not stop them coming to him. His immediate approach was to the Jewish leaders, which would include the elders and the rulers of the synagogues.

Paul’s address to them was “...*men and brethren...*” which is not to say that they were *christian* brothers, but they were *Jewish* brothers. The Jews themselves refer to other Jews as *brethren* in 28:21.

Paul’s message to them was:

- I have done nothing against our people
- Nor the customs of our fathers
- But I was arrested in Jerusalem
- Then handed over to the Romans
- I was tried by the Romans and not found guilty
- But the Jews objected to this
- So I was compelled to appeal to Caesar
- But it was not because I wanted to bring a charge against any of the Jews.
- I have called you to meet you and talk with you about this
- It is because of the very hope of Israel that I am in bondage

The first part of the message would have brought nothing of concern to the Jews. However the last point must have attracted their sense of inquiry, and they wanted to learn more about what Paul was saying.

The Jewish leaders responded to Paul:

- We have not received any letters from Judea concerning you
- None of the (Jewish) brethren who have come from there have reported or spoken anything bad about you
- But we are willing and desirous to hear what you have to say
- The only thing that we have heard about the christian sect is that it is spoken against by the Jews everywhere.

It had been the best part of 6 months since Paul was before Agrippa in Jerusalem. If he had made a *quick trip* to Rome, then he might have arrived before any warnings had come from Judea. The best thing that Paul could do was to establish himself there as quickly as possible, and be in a position to head off any bad rumours that might come along at a later time. That is exactly what Paul did in contacting the Jewish leaders as soon as he had arrived. Given the hatred that the Jews in Judea had towards Paul (see notes on chapter 26) and Paul’s *slow trip* to Rome, it is rather surprising that no warning letters or letters of condemnation had come from Judea.

The response of the leaders was commendable, as they had heard bad things about the christians from “*everywhere*” yet they were prepared to investigate for themselves rather than just take the word of others. The conciliatory approach of Paul would have been instrumental in accomplishing the outcome. Another day was set aside for a deeper discussion “...*we desire to hear from you what you think...*” (28:22 NKJV).

What does Paul teach the Jews when they come to him?

The *lodging* where Paul was staying is the same word (*xenia*) Paul used in Philemon 22 where it is translated as *guestroom*. This is a different word and to “...*his own hired house...*” (*misthoma*) which might suggest that Paul initially was staying with friends (perhaps Aquila and Priscilla) before he moved into his own rented place.

The Jews came back *in large numbers*, “...*many came to him at his lodging...*” (28:23 NKJV) which shows that they trusted Paul, and they were eager to hear what he had to say. Paul addressed them, and in his usual manner presented the gospel:

- *He explained* to them (probably gave them the background as to how he came to be here, most likely beginning with his Jewish background and conversion)
- *and solemnly testified about the kingdom of God* (He would have started with the promise of the coming kingdom – the Jews were looking for it – and shown how it was fulfilled in Christ and the church)
- *persuading them concerning Jesus* (Showing and attempting to convince them that Jesus was the very promised Messiah)
- *from both the Law of Moses and the Prophets* (It was not only the fulfilment of prophecy that proved that Jesus was the Messiah, but Jesus was also the fulfilment of the Law of Moses, and was the only man who ever kept it perfectly – again proving His Messiahship).

The discussion continued all day long “...*from morning till evening...*” (28:23). The Jews were very fair and very attentive indeed. Perhaps only exceeded in their fair-mindedness by the Bereans (17:11). “...*And some were persuaded by the things which were spoken, and some disbelieved...*” (28:24 NKJV). A division arose “...*so when they did not agree among themselves...*” (28:25 NKJV), so some of them must have been convinced and persuaded enough by what Paul said to be able to argue the case against those who did not accept it. We need to remember that these were Jewish *leaders*. They were well schooled in the Old Testament (just as Paul was). They must have had some knowledge of Jesus, and had certainly been acquainted with the christians (28:22). It had been some years (AD 49 = 12 years earlier) that the Jews had been expelled from Rome due to conflicts between them and the christians (18:2). After being allowed back to Rome, it is perfectly understandable that they would be very wary about getting involved with the christians in any way. This also explains why Paul took such a gentle approach, – and the assurance that when he appealed to Nero that he had absolutely no reason to want to say anything bad against any of the Jews (28:19). We can see why they gave Paul such a fair hearing.

However, the disagreement between the group continued to rise, such that Paul dismissed the group with one more passage of prophecy from Isaiah, that Paul says was referring to them!!! (Is 6:9-10):

- You hear but do not understand
- Your heart has grown dull
- You are not listening
- You have closed your eyes so that you can't see
- If you opened your eyes and ears it would be perfectly obvious
- Because of this, the Messiah cannot heal them of their sins

Paul told them that the gospel had gone to the Gentiles, with a much stronger reception than from amongst the Jews. As they left “...*the Jews departed and had a great dispute among themselves...*” (28:29 NKJV).

What happens to Paul?

Luke tells us in just a few words, that “...*For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him...*” (28:30 NIV). It is during this two-year period that four of the epistles of the New Testament were written – Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians, and Philemon. [And if Paul did write Hebrews (and I do not believe that he did – see the notes of my Hebrew studies) then it also was written during this time].

Under Roman law, there was a statute of limitations that required the charges pressed against a man to be brought by his accusers within two years. It would appear that the accusers never did come within that two-year period and press their charges, and so at the end of that time Paul would have been released.

It makes sense that it was just at the end of that time that Luke wrote (or finished writing) the book of Acts, and concluded somewhat abruptly the story of Paul's life and work.

Whilst Paul was under house arrest, he was limited to where he could go. But there was no limit as to who could come and visit him. We do know however, that Paul had many faithful co-workers who were there to help him during this time. These included:

- Luke the beloved physician (Col 4:14)
- Timothy (Col 1:1; Phm 1; Php 1:1)
- John Mark (Col 4:10)
- Aristarchus, who started off to Rome with Paul & Luke (Col 4:10; Phm 24)
- Demas – who later left him (Col 4:14)
- Epaphras, a preacher from the Lycus valley (Col 4:12)
- Tychius from Ephesus (Eph 6:12; Col 4:7)
- Epaphroditus who came from Philippi to bring money for Paul. Whilst in Rome he became sick and nearly died (Php 2:25-27)
- A Jew named Jesus (also called Justus) Col 4:11)

The letter writing is worthy of some further comment. Ephesians, Colossians and Philemon form a trilogy that were written about the same time. Ephesians deals with Christ and the church, and is a call to faithfulness; Colossians deals with our relationship to God; and Philemon deals with our relationship to each other. The time of writing Philemon was close to the end of Paul's imprisonment, as he is soon expecting to be released and asks Philemon to prepare the guest room for his imminent arrival. In both the Colossian and Philemon letters, Luke is still with Paul in Rome. The letter to the Philippian church omits to mention Luke (who had worked with the Philippian church for five years), so it suggests that it was written after the other letters – at the very end of Paul's 2-year imprisonment, after Luke had left Rome, and when Paul is expecting an immediate verdict on his case.

Paul would have been busy indeed, not only in his letter writing, but with his co-workers in the gospel, and also with “...*all who came to him...*” (28:30).

The Roman authorities *knew exactly* what Paul was doing for this two-year period – as a prisoner who had appealed to Caesar awaiting trial, and right in the heart of the Roman Empire. He was with one of their soldiers night and day, possibly chained to him!!! The fact that the Romans put absolutely no obstacle in Paul's way gives full assurance that the Romans did not regard what Paul was doing or teaching as being in any way as illegal, subversive, or propaganda. He was “...*preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ with all confidence, no one forbidding him...*” (28:31 NKJV).

But we are left to ask further questions:

- What happened to Paul?
- What did he do when he got out of house arrest?
- How did he die?

The answer to these questions leads us to the final study from the series on the life of Paul to complement this study on the book of Acts – *The Latter Life of Paul*, and will conclude this series of studies of Acts in a few lessons time.

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