

Expository thoughts on
The Acts Of The Apostles

Daily Bible Reading Notes

Week 19 (Chapter 28)

Grace Church Belper

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Acts 28:1-6

1 Now when they had escaped, they then found out that the island was called Malta. 2 And the natives showed us unusual kindness; for they kindled a fire and made us all welcome, because of the rain that was falling and because of the cold. 3 But when Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks and laid them on the fire, a viper came out because of the heat, and fastened on his hand. 4 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 escaped the sea, yet justice does not allow to live." 5 But he shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm. 6 However, they were expecting that he would swell up or suddenly fall down dead. But after they had looked for a long time and saw no harm come to him, they changed their minds and said that he was a god.

Paul is still travelling to Rome, but the journey has not gone at all as his guards had planned it! They had been driven to and fro in the sea for a fortnight, and at last been shipwrecked upon an island - the island of Malta. God had determined that his servant would come to Rome, and speak on his behalf; but in his own way and timing. Paul's master had work for him to do on this island too, and in his oversight and control, he had brought him there to do it.

These verses show us that we may find a mixture of human kindness and religious foolishness in the unconverted. Those who are unsaved are not as bad as can possibly be, because God still gives good gifts to them. He is always restraining the evil that is at work in this fallen world. When the ship-wrecked party came to this island, they found "unusual kindness". It is not hard to imagine that many might not be pleased to have a large number of prisoners on their island. The natives, though, did not chase them off or shun them. They made a fire, and gave them a welcome, taking pity upon them because of the cold and because of the rain.

The Bible certainly teaches that unconverted people are deeply depraved. Their hearts are at war with God (Romans 8:7). They do not love his law, and cannot do what pleases him; their love of their selves forbids them to do so. This, though, does not mean that God has taken away all of his goodness from them. There will come a time when God removes every restraint from the wicked; and that shall be hell. If he did so now, though, we would not be able to survive in this world at all.

We have two mistakes to avoid. The first is to think that because someone is kind and generous, that therefore all is well with them. This mixes up the two great commandments which God gave. We must remember that the first commandment of all is to love God, above all. A lifetime of good deeds towards man cannot make up for having snubbed our maker. We might give all our possessions away, and lay down our lives for the poor; but even if we do, we must still answer for our rebellion against God. The opportunities, possessions and our life itself, were all gifts that came from him. On the other hand, we must not expect too much from those who do not know God. The natives on Malta showed Paul great kindness; but when he was bitten by a viper, they soon concluded that he must be a murderer. They did not have a shred of evidence for it, but immediately jumped to the decision. When he did not swell up or drop down dead, they changed their

Here is a great thought with which to end our study of this precious book. The work of the gospel was not finished in Paul's day, and has not been finished since, but the Lord Jesus is conquering the nations. The gospel is advancing throughout the world, and shall continue to do so: he shall reign, and all his foes shall be slain. Hail Lord Jesus: suffering Saviour, ruler of the world, Son of God. "Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish from the way, when his wrath is kindled but a little. Blessed are all they that put their trust in him" (Psalm 2:12).

minds and decided he must be a god instead. By changing their minds like this, they were showing their unstable hearts. They did not have the foundation which is laid in Christ.

Their decisions may seem very foolish to us. Similar things, though, are going on all around. It is a mark of Christian maturity when we are able to hold back judgment, until we have all the facts. It is one of the features of our fleshly impatience which drives us to think we must jump to a conclusion - we must be either for or against in everything. If we know God, though, we should be content to say that God knows all things, and we should wait until he makes them clear. The Lord Jesus is in control; we may safely leave things in his hands. Maybe he will not show us until the day of judgment; and in that case we should be content to not know until then.

Let us secondly see from these verses that *Christians are not protected by God from unwelcome events*. The difference between the righteous and the wicked in this world is not that one lives in perfect peace whilst the other has only trouble. That separation will not take place until the end of the world. To look for it now, is a big mistake. The great difference should be in how we respond to the unwelcome events that will surely come our way. This life is the great time of testing - in which we may honour God by how we receive unhappy providences, or dishonour him with our grumbling and complaining about them.

This was surely a lesson which Paul had learnt a long time before this! He had faced persecutions and trials of so many kinds even before he was ship-wrecked on Malta. He had, though, he had one more opportunity to show another set of people the sufficiency of God. He cheerfully persevered, through ship-wreck, through cold and rain, through being bitten by a viper, through the various opinions that the islanders held about him. Each of these was its own challenge; in each of them the question never occurred to Paul that the islanders had abandoned him or did not care for him. In each of them the question was rather: would Paul honour his Saviour in this situation too? There is a lesson for us! In each situation of life, the real issue is not over the faithfulness of God; it is over ours. God has proved his own love towards us in such a way that it can never be doubted. He gave his own Son to redeem us from our sins; what more could he give? No unhappy event can ever overthrow this great fact. The Lord Jesus is at the right hand of God, praying for and ruling for the benefit of his people. Whatever happens to us, in God's wisdom, is in perfect agreement with this. Whether we can work out just how that might or might not be, yet it is still true. God is for us; he did not give his Son in a careless moment, to change his mind later. His will and purpose, his mercy and grace, are eternally the same.

We must then, whatever comes our way, welcome the opportunity to glorify God. If unpleasant things never happened to God's people, how would they grow? How could they learn to lean upon the faithfulness of God, and how would they show the difference which Jesus has made? When would they be able to prove to the world the sufficiency of God's love and promises to them? Let us learn, then, to consider this truth in all of our troubles. Our troubles are no proof that God has forgotten us; the return of the Saviour, that will end all suffering has not yet taken place. They are part of what we must face, living in a fallen world, and infinitely less than our sins deserve. They are the opportunities God gives us that we might, whether seen by the whole world or observed only by his angels, bring praise to his name.

Acts 28:7-16

7 In that region there was an estate of the leading citizen of the island, whose name was Publius, who received us and entertained us courteously for three days. 8 And it happened that the father of Publius lay sick of a fever and dysentery. Paul went in to him and prayed, and he laid his hands on him and healed him. 9 So when this was done, the rest of those on the island who had diseases also came and were healed. 10 They also honoured us in many ways; and when we departed, they provided such things as were necessary. 11 After three months we sailed in an Alexandrian ship whose figurehead was the Twin Brothers, which had wintered at the island. 12 And landing at Syracuse, we stayed three days. 13 From there we circled round and reached Rhegium. And after one day the south wind blew; and the next day we came to Puteoli, 14 where we found brethren, and were invited to stay with them seven days. And so we went toward Rome. 15 And from there, when the brethren heard about us, they came to meet us as far as Appii Forum and Three Inns. When Paul saw them, he thanked God and took courage. 16 Now when we came to Rome, the centurion delivered the prisoners to the captain of the guard, but Paul was permitted to dwell by himself with the soldier who guarded him.

As we read these words, the book of Acts is almost at its conclusion. It all began nearly thirty years earlier in Jerusalem. At the heart of the nation of Israel, the church began when the Holy Spirit came to the twelve Jewish apostles. Now, it had spread to the centre of power in the world – Rome. The church was now a great body of peoples from all kinds of backgrounds, united in Christ. Its greatest missionary had not been in that upper room in Jerusalem, but was now about to arrive as a prisoner at the empire's capital.

In this part of Luke's account, we can see *the goodness of God in encouraging his servants*. They had been ship-wrecked on Malta for a reason. They were not in the hands of cruel fate, and God was not playing games with them. In God's sovereignty, he wished them to arrive in Italy – but not without serving him on this small island too. Would Paul have ever planned to visit Malta and minister there? Probably not, as it was far too unimportant a place. God, though, had people there who he wished to encounter his missionary - and so Paul came to be there. Whilst he was there, he came into contact with Malta's most important citizen (verse 7), and was received and looked after by him. He, Publius, had a sick father – who the apostle was then able to heal by prayer in the name of Jesus Christ (verse 8). This good work became known round the island, and much more good was then done.

What is Luke showing us here? He is again showing us how well treated the missionaries were by the officials of the empire. Paul was no trouble-maker, but a man with a good reputation, against whom they could find no objection. God was encouraging Paul through all this, showing him that he need not fear. He was a prisoner of the mightiest nation in the world – but if he acted uprightly, God would protect him. He could even bring him into friendship with those in the highest places.

Paul and his fellow travellers were then encouraged again as they sailed into Italy, and approached the capital. As they came to Puteoli (still over a hundred kilometres away), they met believers, with whom they were able to have fellowship for a week (verse 14). What a boost that must have been to them! They had not met with a church in any place

surprise to God, who had spoken of it many hundreds of years earlier through the prophet Isaiah (v26-27). The hearts of the Jews had become hard. They could not hear the good wonderful news, because their ears were closed. They could not see the beauty and glory of Christ, because their eyes were shut. How had this happened? Because for many years they had heard, understood, yet refused to believe; now God carried out his awesome judgment against them: they would hear, but not understand, and so be unable to believe. A remnant would be saved - praise God! - but the nation itself was now rejected, and heading for the terrible judgment that came upon them only a decade later in AD70.

This lesson is not only one for Jews who lived two thousand years ago; it is one for us today. The Lord Jesus continues to send his messengers into the world, with the same loving invitation to turn to him and live. Those faithful men speak about exactly the same things as Paul did - the promised Messiah's coming, death and resurrection. They continue to plead with sinners to consider their ways, and come to him. And in just the same way the same dangers remain for those who resist this message. Nobody can remain safe when they do so, because God has forbidden it. There will come a set time, and an invisible line which one crosses - beyond which a person cannot hear the gospel any more. He or she becomes dull, and insensitive to its truths and glories. Things that were once seen clearly now become foggy, and the way to eternal death is now inevitable, unless the Lord should have mercy to perform an extraordinary miracle.

My friend, be careful how you hear the gospel! You might think that you are judging and weighing it up. You need to know this: as you hear it, God is also judging you. He is noting your response, seeing how your heart is affected by the knowledge of your sin, seeing what desires you have after him and the salvation which is in his Son. You might think that you can respond as you please, in your own time; but many who have thought so have found themselves horribly mistaken at last. Turn to the Lord without delay; nobody who ever truly did so regretted it.

Finally, let us hear this passage's declaration to us that *the kingdom would be largely Gentile*. Non-Jews would, and have, made up the overwhelming bulk of the church and the people of God. In God's great mercy, a remnant of Jews throughout history have been saved; but by and large the pattern has been just as Paul spoke. The Jews were hardened and unable to receive their own Messiah; the gospel then came to the Gentiles, and for many amongst them who were willing to be taught.

As we look back over the last two thousand years, we can see many wonderful confirmations of this truth. We can see Koreans, Africans, South Americans, Chinese, Indians, who have turned to the Saviour in large numbers. Nations of the world which were far remote from Paul, and centuries away from the day of God's choosing, have in God's time turned to the Lord Jesus. Across the globe, the Saviour is being preached, and has gatherings across the whole map. When Paul said "and they will hear it!" (verse 2) he was not speaking only of his own time. He foresaw, in the Spirit of prophecy, the years that were to come. He knew the Scriptures, which said that the nations had been given the Messiah as his inheritance (Psalm 2:8). He knew the words of the Lord Jesus, who commanded them with all authority to be disciplined and brought into obedience to his name (Matthew 28:18-20). Paul foresaw the triumph of the word of God.

that I should heal them." 28 Therefore let it be known to you that the salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will hear it! 29 And when he had said these words, the Jews departed and had a great dispute among themselves. 30 Then Paul dwelt two whole years in his own rented house, and received all who came to him, 31 preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ with all confidence, no one forbidding him.

The book of Acts ends with these words. Its ending seems quite surprising to us; there is no great climax. Paul just carries on preaching and evangelising, using the opportunities that were given to him. That is the point; the story has not ended. There was no moment when the apostle could say "it is all finished; now I shall do something else". The Lord Jesus' conquest of the nations had only just begun. The apostles laid the foundation; the kingdom had many advances still to make. These verses do though, give a proper conclusion to the book. If we read them carefully, we will gain much from them.

In these verses, we see *the example of a faithful man*. Paul is held out to us in Scriptures not just as an instructor to the church, but a pattern (1 Timothy 1:16). One of the virtues that he excelled in was faithfulness. Whenever he faced hardship and difficulty, he pressed on, trusting the Lord. He never said "my work is done - I now retire from the Lord's service", but was always looking ahead to the next opportunity. He was commanded by Christ to serve him in preaching the gospel to the Jew, and then to the Gentile. At the end of the book having arrived in Rome, though he was a prisoner, he carried on doing just that. It was a new city, and there were new people there who had never been taught about the Lord Jesus. He gathered them, he explained, reasoned and persuaded with them from morning until evening. He opened the Scriptures, showing how the work of Christ perfectly matched what the prophets had spoken. When many unbelieving Jews rejected their own Messiah, he turned to the Gentiles, and spent his days, weeks and years evangelising them. He never swerved from his purpose: to be continually "teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ" (verse 31). This is where Luke leaves us: with God's servant carrying on his work.

Believers must never think that they have "arrived" in this world. Whilst we are still in the flesh, there is still work to be done. Sin has not been defeated, and Satan has not ceased fighting. There is still resistance in the world to the kingdom of our Lord, and sinners who desperately need to hear of him. This should not discourage us, as if the task were never-ending, because it is not. One day it will be completed, and the Lord will be revealed in great power and glory. He will one day have put every enemy under his feet, and then he shall return and destroy death itself (1 Corinthians 15:25-26). Until that day arrives, we must press on. Our Lord is well able to provide us with all that we need to do so. His word is full of the most gracious and wonderful promises. He is so very near to renew and refresh us each and every day. His Spirit is still sent to keep us and assure us of the inheritance which is to come. So let us not lose heart; our outward man might be fading away, but inwardly we are being renewed day by day. When we finally exhaust our earthly life, we shall dwell with the Lord. We will at last receive a new and incorruptible body from him. If we are alive, it is for a reason: the Lord wishes us to press on.

A second lesson in these verses is that *resistance to the gospel leads to hardness, and rejection*. This was the continuing pattern with the Jews, and is seen again here. It was no

for some months; but now here they met with one that they probably had never known existed before. As they went up to the capital to face all that was waiting for them, God had already prepared brethren to cheer them along the way. How heartening it must have been to Paul to see some of the fruit which the gospel had borne in Italy already. What promise he must have taken it as, of what God intended to do through his servants there.

We must always remember that if we love the kingdom of the Lord Jesus, yet God loves infinitely more. If we desire to see the gospel advance, it is only the tiniest reflection of how our heavenly Father feels. We might be very puzzled about why things seem so slow and so difficult; but this is only because God has hidden the details from us. God brings us through many trials and hardships – but not because he wishes to crush us. His purpose is to mature us, to make us more like his Son. His aim is to purify us, that we might hold him more closely to him. He wishes to wean us off sin and the world, that we might truly love his daughters and sons. So, he gives us many encouragements on the way – from places we might not expect. How good a God he is! Every year that we continue as believers we shall discover more of this.

Secondly, let us learn from these verses *what the true cause of the gospel's spread is*. Was there every a missionary who was more dedicated than Paul? Was any man more faithful, more persevering, more earnest, more wise and more holy than him? And yet, none of these things were the true cause of his success. There were believers in Puteoli, where he had never travelled. He was now further away from Jerusalem than he had been on any of his missionary journeys; and yet a church had formed there. How they had come to faith in Christ, we do not know. Maybe the church had begun through Jews who had been in Jerusalem at Pentecost. Perhaps they had all been converted elsewhere, and moved to Puteoli for one reason or another. Maybe some zealous believers from the church in Rome had set out to evangelise all the areas round about. We do not know. What we do know is that the gospel's spread does not depend on the gifts of great men. It depends upon the power of the risen Christ, sending his Holy Spirit. When he opens a sinner's eyes and convicts him of sin, nothing can stop that sinner from coming to him. When the Lord makes the preached gospel powerful, all of hell cannot prevent its success. It is to the things that we need to look, and not to any schemes or plans of our own. The gospel shall advance and shall prevail, because it is his power that is behind it. We need never lose heart – because our Saviour still reigns.

Acts 28:16-23

16 Now when we came to Rome, the centurion delivered the prisoners to the captain of the guard; but Paul was permitted to dwell by himself with the soldier who guarded him. 17 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: "Men and brethren, though I have 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. 18 who, when they had examined me, wanted to let me go, because there was no cause for putting me to death. 19 But when the Jews spoke against it, I was compelled to appeal to Caesar, not that I had anything of which to accuse my nation. 20 For this reason therefore I have called for you, to see you and speak with you, because for the hope of Israel I am bound with this chain." 21 Then they said to him, "We neither received letters from Judea

concerning you, nor have any of the brethren who came reported or spoken any evil of you. 22 But we desire to hear from you what you think; for concerning this sect, we know that it is spoken against everywhere." 23 So when they had appointed him a day, many came to him at his lodging, to whom he explained and solemnly testified of the kingdom of God, persuading them concerning Jesus from both the Law of Moses and the prophets, from morning till evening."

The gospel has at last arrived in Rome. Through violence, arrest, long imprisonments, trials, ship-wreck and more, Paul had eventually made it. Truly God's ways are not like our ways! (Isaiah 55:8-9). We are now in the last parts of the book of Acts; Luke's account will soon come to an end. After reporting so much about the journey, surely the Spirit of God has some important lessons for us to learn now at its end. Let us study these words with care and sincerity.

One great lesson from these verses is to see how *the Christian must take every opportunity to spread the gospel*. What a great example Paul gives us here! He had been on the most long and painful journey. He was being unjustly imprisoned, there being no real case of any kind against him. Yet he did not sit around in self-pity, or spend his time telling others about the unfairness of it all. He had no intention of just counting off the days until he was free. Once he had had a few days to regain some strength, he immediately called the Jews to meet with him, so that he might tell them the good news about the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul was a prisoner, but gives us no impression that he was very concerned about it. All we read that he was concerned about, was to pass on the message about what Jesus had done. For him, everything revolved around the gospel. It was the very reason why he was "bound with this chain" (verse 20). Surely there is a great deal for us to learn from this example. Paul was a true servant of his master - he cared for doing God's will, and gave himself thoroughly to it.

This, we must learn, is the way for the gospel to advance. Christian people must value it above all other things. We have a vast number of reasons to do so. Did not the Son of God himself come down from heaven for our sakes? Was not the Lord of glory crucified on the behalf of sinners? Is his dying and rising again not our hope for time and eternity, our safety in the day of judgment? Is there anything more precious than the gospel of Christ? If these things are true, then our lives ought to be brought into line with them. We may not be sent as apostles to evangelise foreign countries, but there is always something we can do to forward Christ's kingdom. We must remember that we have been bought with a price; we are not our own. If we want to see our Lord's name honoured, we must put his gospel first.

For a second thing, these verses tell us that *the work of the gospel continues*. Maybe we were expecting some great climax when the book came to an end. Would Caesar himself hear the gospel, and would rulers of the empire be converted? In fact, Luke tells us nothing about any such things. He simply shows us Paul continuing to preach, and the good news continuing to be spread. The good news has come to another city, and will be preached there too, just as it had in many before. The message from this is simple: the story of Acts is unfinished. The gospel came to the ruling city of the world - but that is not the end of the tale. Jesus Christ has not yet been preached everywhere where he intends to

be. There are still sinners that he has purposed to win to himself. There are still people, cultures and nations that he intends to transform by the power of his word. The work does not finish when the apostles all died - it has gone on for almost two thousand years since. The countries of the world are still being evangelised, and there is still much work for us to do.

Reader, have you taken this to heart? Some things have changed between the times of the apostles and now - but some things are exactly the same. The same Lord is risen from the dead, and still reigning at the right hand of God. He is still sending his Spirit to his church, making them his people, and enabling them to serve him. He is still sending out missionaries to the ends of the earth, to proclaim the good news about the forgiveness of sins. The world continues to spin, because the work of the gospel is not yet all done. God has not made us so that we can spend all our time amusing ourselves, building our careers, or enjoying our families, good as these things might be in their place. Our purpose, if we have one at all, can only be in relation to what his great work is. He is calling the nations to his Son, and looking for fruit for the honour of Christ. Let us live as those who understand this!

Finally, these verses once more show us the *wisdom and sovereignty of God*. Throughout all the empire, Paul had been a hunted man. From city to city, the Jews in particular had opposed him with violence, and sought to take his life. Now though, Paul preached freely with nobody being able to stop him. He was a prisoner of Rome, and had his own personal guard (verse 16). The ruling authorities had taken him under their care, and permitted him to do as he pleased, which the Jews could do nothing about. Is not this outcome of the events something to be admired? Once more, God had glorified his name by bringing about good out of evil. The gospel was now freely preached, the pagan Romans working on his behalf.

God is working all things for good. Everything is under his control, and he knows just what he is doing. We might be puzzled over his ways, but his wisdom will be known in the end. He shall fulfil everything that he has promised; we must simply trust him. We shall never find that he made a mistake, or forgot to take care of us. We shall only ever regret that we did not trust him more. If our hearts are like Paul's, full of love to the Lord and eager to serve him, we may rely on him for all things. If we fix our hearts and minds on the love of Christ in dying for our sins, we shall never have a reason to be ashamed.

Acts 28:23-31

23 So when they had appointed him a day, many came to him at his lodging, to whom he explained and solemnly testified of the kingdom of God, persuading them concerning Jesus from both the Law of Moses and the Prophets, from morning till evening. 24 And some were persuaded by the things which were spoken, and some disbelieved. 25 So when they did not agree among themselves, they departed after Paul had said one word. "The Holy Spirit spoke rightly through Isaiah the prophet to our fathers, 26 saying, 'I will send to this people and say: "Hearing you will hear, and shall not understand; and seeing you will see, and not perceive; 27 for the hearts of this people have grown dull. Their ears are hard of hearing, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with the ears, lest they should understand with their hearts and turn, and be healed."