

“THE LAST LAP” (Acts 28:1-31)

This final chapter describes Paul’s journey to the city of Rome. God had promised to bring him there safely and the Lord will keep His promise.



And when they were escaped, then they knew that the island was called Melita. And the barbarous people shewed us no little kindness: for they kindled a fire, and received us every one, because of the present rain, and because of the cold. (v1-2)

Before he gets to Rome, Paul finds himself shipwrecked on the coast of the island of Melita or Malta, which is between Sicily and Africa. Due to its central position in the Mediterranean Sea, the Romans made Melita an important naval station. God had brought them safely through this terrible ordeal. Paul’s ministry on the island is the focus of the first ten verses of this chapter. The Greeks regarded anybody who spoke in a tongue other than Greek a barbarian. Doubtless, Paul was very cold from the shipwreck and desperately needed the fire to dry himself out from the sea. Providence moved the hearts of these islanders to show such hospitality.

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. And 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. And he shook off the beast into the fire, and felt no harm. Howbeit 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. (v3-6)

The local people had a superstitious belief that linked wrongdoing with natural calamity but then they later changed their minds and decided that Paul was a god. So when they saw that Paul was bitten by a viper they initially assumed, albeit wrongly, that God was judging him. The imperfect tense of the verb “saying” means that they continuously talked over this judgment. The islanders instinctive sense of morality evidences the truth of Romans 2:14-15, that the law of God is written on the hearts of every human. It is true that certain ills that befall man are due to his sin

such as some recklessly acquired sexually transmitted diseases. However, the book of Job especially teaches us not to immediately make this chain of causation in every circumstance.



Charles Swindoll makes helpful observations,

“The natives who observed the incident jumped to a conclusion both cruel and inaccurate. Instantly they judged that Paul’s calamity proved his guilt. Interestingly, even though these barbarians (the actual Greek term) lacked education and refined culture, they possessed an inner standard of justice. They leapt to an instantaneous (albeit incorrect) opinion: “Undoubtedly this man is a murderer.” To them the vicious snakebite represented justice getting her due. There is something amazingly relevant about this episode. A “punishment” mind-set is not limited to rough islanders in the Mediterranean. Heathen tribespeople aren’t the only ones who jump to the erroneous conclusion that those who suffer are simply getting what they deserve. This “calamity-is-proof-of-guilt” attitude lives on with us today, a blunder as old as time itself. The classic case in Scripture is Job. Here was an upright man who worked hard, dealt honestly with people, reared a fine family, and walked with his God. Then suddenly, seemingly out of nowhere, a whirlwind of multiple tragedies drove the man to his knees. This “calamity-is-proof-of-guilt” attitude lives on with us today . . . It was bad enough to lose his livestock and all other means of income, but on top of that he lost each one of his children, and finally . . . his health. With hardly a moment between these calamities to catch his breath and gain a measure of equilibrium, Job was reduced to a painful hulk of humanity, covered from head to toe with oozing skin ulcers. Exit: compassion. Enter: thoughtless counselors of blame. One man after another pointed a long, bony finger into the face of the sufferer, frowning at him with condemning words and advising him to confess his guilt. In effect, each one said, “You’re getting what you deserve.” The confrontational dialogue contained in the ancient Book of Job is remarkably relevant. Who knows? Maybe it flashed across Paul’s mind when he heard, “Undoubtedly, this man is a murderer. Justice has not allowed him to live!” I wish there were some way for sufferers to be delivered from such unjust and unfair criticism, but I know of none. It is painful enough to endure the severe blows of life, isn’t it? But when words of condemnation based on superstition and prejudice bite into us, the venom is almost more than we can bear.”

Paul did not panic when this snake attacks him. This miracle along with the subsequent healings were the promised signs of an apostle (Mark 16:17-18). Neither a shipwreck nor a poisonous snake can thwart God's purpose for His servants until their work is done. The local pagan people watched him intently for a long time and were amazed at his preservation. They then showed their perverted view of God's natural revelation by claiming to personify God in the image of sinful man by declaring Paul a god (cf. Rom. 1:23). Doubtless, Paul capitalized on this opportunity to share the Gospel, although we are not given the details.

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. And 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. So when this was done, others also, which had diseases in the island, came, and were healed: Who also honoured us with many honours; and when we departed, they laded us with such things as were necessary. (v7-10)

No man is greater than his prayer life. As Hudson Taylor said, "God uses men who are weak and feeble enough to lean on him." He prayed to emphasise to these people that the power came from God. Paul did not presume that God would heal through him without seeking the Will of God. God is Sovereign not man. Again, the presence of Paul became a source of blessing for those travelling with him.

And after three months we departed in a ship of Alexandria, which had wintered in the isle, whose sign was Castor and Pollux. And landing at Syracuse, we tarried there three days. And 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: Where we found brethren, and were desired to tarry with them seven days: and so we went toward Rome. (v11-14)

After some three months at Malta for the winter, they now travel some eighty miles north to Syracuse the capital of the island of Sicily. Puteoli is a port in the bay of Naples about 145 miles southwest of Rome. The gospel truly had spread throughout the Empire. There is no evidence that any of the apostles ever visited here.

And from thence, when the brethren heard of us, they came to meet us as far as Appii forum, and The three taverns: whom when Paul saw, he thanked God, and took courage. (v15)

These two companies of Christians came out from Rome as far as the Forum of Appius, which was 40 miles from Rome. Others came 30 miles out to the Three Taverns. What comfort and joy this expression of love must have brought to Paul's heart. We often underestimate the encouragement expressions such as these can have on the most mature of the servants of God. Previously, Paul had written the epistle to the Romans in which he had told them how he desired to come and minister to them (Rom. 15:24, 32). This must have been a wonderful testimony to Christian love to all the unsaved prisoners and soldiers with Paul.

And 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. (v16)

Paul arrives into the capital city of Rome at last. God proves He is faithful to His faithful man. Paul's heart must have been full of thanksgiving. The Emperor's city was about to hear the gospel declared by the great apostle.



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. Who, when they had examined me, would have let me go, because there was no cause of death in me. But when the Jews spake against it, I was constrained to appeal unto Caesar; not that I had ought to accuse my nation of. For 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. (v17-20)

As Paul had always done, he preaches the gospel first to the Jews. We know from history that there were least seven Jewish synagogues in Rome. These Jews may have been cautious as their relationship with the Romans was a precarious one. For Claudius had expelled all the Jews from Rome just a few years before. Paul could not go to the synagogues, so he asked the chief men to come to him. He did not waste time and called them after three days. No doubt he was in much prayer about this matter in the first three days. Despite their continual rejection for him and his personal exhaustion, this man's heart still burns with love for his fellow Jews. He was not passive but actively sought out opportunities. Paul wrote, "Bless them which persecute you: bless, and curse not." (Romans 12:14) No group hated him more than the Jews, yet Paul truly practiced what he preached.

And they said unto him, We neither received letters out of Judaea concerning thee, neither any of the brethren that came shewed or spake any harm of thee. But we desire to hear of thee what thou thinkest: for as concerning this sect, we know that every where it is spoken against. 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. And some believed the things which were spoken, and some believed not. (v21-24)

What a Bible class these Jewish leaders had. Paul sticks to the message that worked all of the Empire – **preaching Christ from the Scriptures**. Jesus Christ dominated this man's thinking and preaching throughout his ministry. We are to declare the whole counsel of God, but the cross is the centre of that message.

This is the typical response to the preaching of the gospel of Christ, “*And some believed the things which were spoken, and some believed not.*” It divided the group that had come united to hear Paul.



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, Saying, Go unto this people, and say, Hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing ye shall see, and not perceive: For 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 ears, and understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them. Be it known therefore unto you, that the salvation of God is sent unto the Gentiles, and that they will hear it. (v25-28)

The Word of God brings comfort even when men reject the gospel. Paul derived comfort from the parallels between his ministry and that of Isaiah. He cites the prophecy of Isaiah 6:9-10 (the same passage quoted by the Lord Jesus Christ in Matthew 13:10-14) to prove that the stubborn Jews who rejected the gospel were actually fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy. Gilbrant notes,

“Paul quoted from Isaiah because he wanted those Jews who were rejecting the gospel to realize they were not merely turning away from him and his message. They were closing their hearts and minds to God and His plan, and in doing so they were coming under judgment just as the Israelites did who rejected Isaiah's message when it was first given over 700 years before.”

This rejection of Christ opened the door now for the Gentiles, “*Be it known therefore unto you, that the salvation of God is sent unto the Gentiles, and that they will hear it.*” But this rejection by most of the Jewish people is not permanent. It will last until the fullness of the Gentiles is brought in (see Romans 11:19-26; Zechariah 12-14)

And when he had said these words, the Jews departed, and had great reasoning among themselves. And Paul dwelt two whole years in his own hired house, and received all that came in unto him, Preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching those things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ, with all confidence, no man forbidding him. (v29-31)

Paul's words on this day were only the beginning. This man tirelessly preached the Gospel to all for two years. Probably he also penned Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. No matter what the external conditions, the Word of God is never bound. Paul was in chains but the Gospel cannot be fettered. God cannot be stopped in the great progress of His redemptive plans for man. Kidner writes,

“God's hand is all over history. God works out His purpose, generation after generation. Limited as we are to one lifetime, each of us sees so little of what happens. A genealogy is a striking way of bringing before us the continuity of God's purpose through the ages. The process of history is not haphazard. There is a purpose in it all. And the purpose is the purpose of God.”

This book of Acts appears to end abruptly with Paul victoriously preaching the Gospel “*with all confidence, no man forbidding him.*” Though a prisoner in the hands of the Romans, he was free in spirit. His trial was delayed in the providence of God, and a door of utterance was therefore opened. Calvin observes, Paul was “no less the servant of Christ, and a preacher of the gospel, when he was in prison, than if he had been at liberty.”

We are not told of the fate of Paul or of the destruction of Jerusalem. This open-endedness is deliberate. For Luke's purpose was to show the beginning of the work of Christ on earth through His Church. This work remains unfinished. Luke's focus is on God and His work not on individuals. God is at work and nothing can stop what He intends to do. Jesus Christ promised He would build His church and the gates of hell would not prevail against it (Matt. 16:18). Spurgeon encourages, “Never lose heart in the power of the gospel. Do not believe that there exists any man, much less any race of men, for whom the gospel is not fitted.”

Some twenty centuries after the ending of Acts, pages of this record are still being written today. Jesus Christ is still at work in and through His church to this very day. The conditions of the world in which we live are exactly the same. Throughout this book we also see the importance of prayer and preaching the Word in the life and growth of the church. Alan Cairns states,

“The book of Acts is clearly an appropriate book for today. God has never withdrawn His Holy Spirit from His Church. He is still the Father's gift to fill His people with power, to bless their witness, and to overcome the attacks of the world and the devil. The entire cycle of waiting in prayer, being filled with the Spirit, going forth with the gospel, and winning the lost for Christ at home and abroad may still be the experience of God's people. We have the message. The world opposes it, but we have the Holy Spirit, whose power will fill us and make us His militant and triumphant witnesses for Christ.”