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Journey's End

Acts 28:1-16

Intro: Ch28 marks the end of a long journey. Not just Paul's journey as a prisoner from Caesarea to Rome but a journey that began all the way back in ch1 with Jesus and His remaining disciples. As Jesus was ascending back to His Father, He told all of His disciples that, "you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (1:8). It's the direction Acts has been moving in from the very beginning. This is the outline Luke has followed in writing his account.

Ch1-7 focused on the earliest witness of believers in Jerusalem. It was a wonderful beginning. Miracles were done. The gospel was declared. The church was established. Deacons were chosen. These were formative days for the infant church. Ch8-12 presents the spread of the gospel to the outer regions of Judea and Samaria. This was caused by persecution following the death of Stephen. It forced Christians to scatter into more secluded and distant areas. Ch13 begins the record of the great missionary expansion of the church to the rest of the world. Paul and Barnabas began to travel and these journeys took Paul throughout Asia into Europe. Important churches were established throughout. Now, here at the end, Paul comes to Rome. Thus Jesus' prophecy that His disciples would be His witnesses "to the ends of the earth" is fulfilled.

Of course, Paul has been focused on going to Rome for some time. He knew that if the gospel was going to reach the world then the time would come when it would need to be preached in the capitol of Western Civilization – Rome! He declared as much in Ephesus when he said, "I must also see Rome" (19: 21). At first glance this may only seem like a personal desire of Paul's but as we move into ch23, Jesus Himself appears to Paul and ordains this as His will when He tells Paul, "you must also testify in Rome" (11). This same message was reinforced by the angel who stood by Paul on the ship in the midst of the storm (27:24).

Now, this much anticipated event has finally happened but not necessarily in the way Paul had anticipated. Paul is not arriving as a missionary or

evangelist – he’s arriving in Rome as a prisoner. But, lest we think this is the end of the matter; what’s most important is not that Paul was arriving as a prisoner of Rome but, in fact, a prisoner of Jesus Christ (**Philemon 1, 9**). Paul didn’t consider himself to be a prisoner of Caesar or a prisoner of circumstances even a prisoner of the religious leaders who started his legal troubles. Paul considered himself to be a prisoner of Jesus Christ and that status super-ceded all other concerns or situations. His first duty was to be obedient to Christ and with that as his focus; everything else was just another opportunity to share the gospel with a new group of listeners.

But, before Paul arrived in Rome, he arrived on a “certain island,” probably the most pathetic arrival of his entire life!

Remember, Paul and 275 other passengers on that Alexandrian freighter had just spent 2 solid weeks being tossed about the Mediterranean Sea without any direction, without any indication of their position, without any food and worst of all, without any hope of survival. They were exhausted physically, mentally and emotionally...and then the ship ran aground and began to be destroyed by the storm-powered surf. All they could do was jump into the raging Sea and try to make their way to shore. Those that could swim did; those that couldn’t clung to debris for dear life! What a pathetic picture this motley and demoralized crew must have presented to the natives on that island.

1-6 – The mystery of the island was quickly resolved - they had landed on the island of Malta. The experienced sailors on this freighter would certainly have known Malta, but not from this side of the island. Almost all the shipping traffic to Malta arrived at the main port, on the other side of the island. The side they landed on was unrecognizable.

The name Malta means refuge and that’s exactly what these shipwrecked victims found. Luke records his personal experience both of the kindness of the Maltese inhabitants and the cold and wet of the storm.

This next scene is a lesson for all believers but especially for leaders in the church. Here we see the Apostle Paul, undoubtedly one of the greatest theologian, evangelist and missionary the church has ever seen and what is he doing? Walking around gathering drift wood for the fire. I means, come on! Aren’t there 275 others in that group? Surely, they could have conscripted a good many of the other prisoners to handle such a mundane task. Hadn’t Paul just single-handedly saved the entire passenger roster

and crew of the ship through his personal relationship with Jesus Christ? Hadn't Paul earned the right to set his old bones down by the fire and warm himself?

Maybe in our estimation he had, but not in his. Once again, we see the servant heart of Paul on full display. Paul never seems to think he was "above" any task that needed to be done. We've already seen how Paul worked a side job in both Corinth and Ephesus when his support for ministry from other churches ran low. Paul never considered any job or task to be beneath his status as an Apostle. This is the true heart of a servant, a heart that is needed in the church today if it is to operate as the Lord intended. Was Paul called to pick up sticks? No, but he was called to be a servant and a servant doesn't get to choose how and when he will serve, just if he will serve; and Paul did!

And look what it got him! Snake bit! "Are you kidding me, God!" How many of us would have that response? "Oh, come on! Really?" In truth, most of us would run screaming if we just saw a snake in the bundle of wood we were gathering, let alone being bitten by one. A poisonous snake at that! This is also an important lesson for believers. Paul was being faithful to God and living as a true, willing servant. But, this didn't keep him from this trial! In fact, it was in the midst of his humble service that the viper appears and it didn't just nibble on him: it fastened on his hand!

Notice how Paul didn't let it bother him. There was no dramatic wailing like, "Why God? Why me? Can't You see that I'm serving You?" There was no, "I can't take anymore of this!" There was no blaming of others, "If the rest of you lazy bums would have gathered some wood, this wouldn't have happened to me!" Paul didn't lash out at God or his travel companions. He didn't get excited at all, he just shook the snake off into the fire. How could he be so calm and unconcerned in the face of such an alarming situation? Paul was calm because he trusted in God's Word.

Sure, Paul had been falsely accused by the religious leaders in Jerusalem, falsely arrested and imprisoned by the Romans for 2 yrs in Caesarea, tossed about for 2 weeks in a storm and then cast upon a beach cold, wet and exhausted. Paul had experienced all of these things but he knew that none of them exempted him from further trials and tribulations but they did encourage him in the midst of the difficult situations. Paul knew that God

hadn't saved him from the storm at sea just to let him die from being snake bit! Paul was protected because God had promised him that he would go to Rome and he wasn't in Rome yet! It wasn't so much that Paul was unstoppable as it was that nothing would stop God promise from being fulfilled! Paul could take God's past faithfulness as a promise of future blessing and protection. We all have the personal experience of God's past faithfulness in our lives.

We've looked at Paul reaction to the snake bite; now notice how the natives responded. The natives who saw all this didn't know anything about Paul except that he was 1 of the prisoners. So, they jumped to an immediate conclusion! They were convinced that Justice had finally caught up with this prisoner. Justice is actually a reference to the Greek goddess of justice, Dikee. The natives, knowing Paul was a prisoner, naturally assumed he had committed a great crime and the goddess of justice wasn't about to permit Paul to escape unpunished.

Clearly, these Maltese inhabitants were way off base but that's to be expected since they were operating under a completely false belief system (polytheism) with severely limited knowledge of facts concerning Paul. Truth is, divine justice (real or imagined) no longer had any legitimate claim on Paul; it had all been satisfied by Christ's work on the cross! So, not only could the pagan concept of justice never harm Paul but the righteous justice of God could never harm him either. And this is true of everyone who has had their sins paid for by the work of Jesus on the cross.

But, after several minutes when, to their surprise, Paul failed to swell up, keel over and die; they jumped to another, completely opposite conclusion. It seemed these natives got all their exercise from jumping to conclusions. They now believed that Paul must be a god! They were wrong on both counts. It's hard to say why people jump to conclusions so easily, but even the disciples did it on one occasion. In [John 9](#), as the disciples were walking with Jesus they saw a man who'd been born blind and they jumped to the conclusion that his affliction must have been the direct result of sin in his life or his parents. They figured they'd worked this out rather carefully and all they needed was a little divine revelation to confirm what they could observe for themselves. Jesus told them they were [wrong](#) on both counts.

Where the natives and the disciples went wrong was that their faulty

analysis resulted from judging by appearances. This is a common failing in Christian circles today, especially in regards to other people's suffering. If something bad happens in a person's life they say, "Obviously, they've done something wrong. God must be trying to teach them a lesson." Now, that may be true sometimes. That's why when bad things happen to us, one of the questions we have to ask is if God is trying to teach us a lesson by it. But understand, this is not always the case. When it comes to suffering, we should never make the knee-jerk one-to-one equation of suffering and sin. There are actually several reasons given in God's Word as to why Christians experience suffering.

1) Common suffering. One thing the Bible says is that suffering is often just the common experience of human beings living in a fallen world. Perhaps Job said it best in [Job 5:6-7](#). Troubles occur in life not necessarily because we sin but because they're just a part of the natural course of life.

2) Corrective suffering. When we do go astray God sometimes brings hard things into our lives to bring us to our senses. We must ask ourselves whether we have done wrong and whether God is bringing the hardship into our lives to draw us up short so we will get off the wrong path and back onto the right one. [Heb 12:5-11](#)

3) Constructive suffering. God develops character by what we suffer. ([Rom 5:3-4](#)) The hard things that come into our lives build character. Sometimes, God allows difficult times to enter our lives just so that we can, at a later time, comfort someone else going through a similar situation with the same comfort that God showed towards us in the midst of our crisis. Sometimes, the only person who can comfort you is someone who's gone through the same trial.

4) Christ-glorifying suffering. This is what Jesus pointed to when the disciples asked about the man who had been born blind ([John 9:3](#)). In other words, some suffering is simply that the glory of God might be displayed in Christians. In most situations it would be presumptuous to assume that this is what God is doing with us. We suffer for other reasons far more often. Still, it is sometimes the case. Did God allow that man be born blind and sit there all those years in darkness just so Jesus could come along and heal him to bring glory to God? That's what Jesus taught! We focus on the 38 years of the man's life while God focuses on eternity, and in the light of

eternity the short span of human life fades into relative insignificance.

5) Cosmic suffering. Job is the greatest story in the Bible about suffering. In Job's case God was demonstrating before Satan and all the fallen and holy angels that a man will worship and serve God for who God is and not just because God cares for him and prospers him. Even when we get to the end of Job's story, the meaning behind his suffering hasn't been explained to Job. The only reason we understand it is because we're shown a scene in heaven where God calls Satan's attention to Job, by bragging on him. Satan challenges the motivation of Job's piety. God permits Satan to afflict Job and Job comes through it triumphantly – along with a good bit of confusion and anguish.

Paul's snakebite was a small incident, but it shows how Paul was still faithfully loving and serving God regardless of his difficult circumstances: captivity, shipwreck, hunger, cold, and snakebite. The people took note of this miracle, and there would be more to come

7-11 – This was a great blessing and a strong contrast to the misery of the previous 2 weeks at sea. God was giving Paul, Luke and Aristarchus a season of relief and replenishment in the midst of their troubles. Luke uses the phrase “leading citizen” and this is the exact technical term used for the person responsible for representing Rome in that location. This is another example of Luke's extraordinary accuracy. But, there's an even greater example here, one that wasn't even realized until nearly the end of the 19th century.

Luke says that the father of Publius was suffering with a fever and dysentery. While this might not seem to be that extraordinary, it's actually a particular malady that is specific to the island of Malta. In fact, it's an ailment known as Malta fever and it's caused by a microorganism that's carried in the milk of Maltese goats. This bacterium produces symptoms that last an average of 4 months but can sometimes last for many years. This sickness wasn't officially identified until 1887. Luke's reference here is interesting but its Paul's response to the illness that is exciting.

Now, Luke says Paul healed the man but we know that it was God who did the healing. Still, the healing happened through the willingness and activity of Paul. God did the work, to be sure; but, Paul made himself ready and

available for God's work to be accomplished through him. There are multitudes of Christians who desire to be used by God in a powerful way to affect the lives of the lost, the sick and the hurting but for the most part, that's as far as they get – a desire. It takes a lot more than just desire to experience the power of God working in and through us. There must be a willingness to prepare, to die to one's self (expectations and preconceived notions), to actively seek to be filled with the Spirit and then to faithfully and obediently respond to the Spirit's leading. If desire doesn't bring you to these other necessary things then it's just wishful thinking. The gospel doesn't travel around the world on good intention.

Paul's willingness to be used mightily by God didn't just benefit Publius' father; it benefitted the entire island. It didn't take long for the news of this healing to spread and those who were ill came to be healed as well. What's interesting is that the word translated healing in vs9 is not the normal word for miraculous healing. The word literally means to receive medical attention. It may very well be that old Dr. Luke was able to serve as a medical missionary right along side of Paul on the island of Malta. Now, Luke doesn't mention any particular evangelistic efforts by Paul on Malta but knowing Paul's calling and character, we can assume that he took every opportunity to share the gospel with the gracious and very lost inhabitants of this island.

Next time, we'll look at Paul's arrival at Rome but what can we glean from our study of his journey so far? The best lessons are seen in the great contrasts between Paul and those around him. There's the contrast of external turmoil and internal peace. Paul had been warned multiple times not to go to Jerusalem but the warnings didn't sway him. His days in Jerusalem and Caesarea were tumultuous times. Then there was the actual storm at sea. Through it all, Paul had complete peace in the Lord because he was completely at peace with the Lord.

Next, while we see vacillation in nearly every other character in this drama, Paul is consistent and steady in his spiritual walk. Why? Paul is steady because he is confident in God's calling on his life. Despite all the turmoil going on around him, Paul was confident that God was working steadily with him to bring him to Rome, where he would bear witness of Him.

Finally, there's the contrast between fear and faithfulness. It was Paul's

unshakable trust in God that allowed him to stay calm in the face of certain danger.

What does this mean for us? We also live in a vacillating world, a world of dangers, and we live around people who are filled with fear. We're called to be just as Paul was in the midst of all that turmoil: counting on God, resting in Him and moving forward steadily to do the work God has called each one of us to do, Can we do it? Will we?

We can and will, if we know that God is with us and that He is leading us each step of the way. 😊