

PAUL PREACHES THE KINGDOM OF GOD IN ROME

Acts 28:1-31

Key Verse: 28:31

“Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ.”

In the last passage we learned of God’s grace in the storm. While the winds raged and the waters crashed—when everyone had given up all hope of being saved—the Lord sent his angel to Paul. The angel stood beside him and said, “Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand trial before Caesar. And God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you.” With God’s word in his heart, Paul overcame fear and became a source of encouragement and blessing to all the other people on the ship. Through Paul’s faith and spiritual leadership, the lives of all on board were saved. During the storms of life, it is most important for each of us to listen to God’s word and find God’s grace. Then we can enjoy God’s salvation, God’s peace and true victory.

Today we come to the final chapter in the book of Acts. It is a beautiful chapter that displays the grace and kindness of God, the glorious image of Christ in Paul, and the fulfillment of God’s redemptive purpose through Paul. At last, Paul arrives in Rome and begins to preach the gospel as a prisoner in a rented house. We can learn many things. Most of all we learn the character of God’s history. We can find our own spiritual direction. May the Holy Spirit guide our study today.

First, God is kind (1-2).

Look at verse 1. “Once safely on shore, we found out that the island was called Malta.” Malta was just south of Sicily. During the storm, they seemed to be driven at random. But when it was over, they were very near Rome, right where God wanted them to be. God is always good. Even through the storm, everything turned out for good. We can trust God in the midst of storms of life.

Look at verse 2. “The islanders showed us unusual kindness. They built a fire and welcomed us all because it was raining and cold.” Paul and his fellow travelers had been wet, cold, tired, hungry, constantly in suspense and suffering from despair for two weeks. There were 276 of them; some were prisoners. It was not a small matter to care for the needs of these unexpected guests. However, the islanders treated them with unusual kindness. It was expressed by a big, warm fire. By using the words “unusual kindness,” Luke suggests it was inspired by the kindness of God. God disciplines, but God also shows kindness. The struggle with the storm lasted two weeks. But God’s kindness through the islanders on Malta lasted for three months. Some people think that God only gives hard training. But God is far more kind than he is strict. In fact, kindness is part of the character of God (Ge 39:21; Ps 18:50; Jer 31:3). We should realize that God is kind and thank him for all his kindness. We should also be kind. Kindness is one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:22). God is kind; we should also be kind.

Second, the image of Christ in Paul (3-10).

In verses 3-10 we see the glorious image of our Lord Jesus Christ in Paul. In the first place, Paul had Jesus’ servant image. Verse 3 says that Paul was gathering a pile of brushwood to put on the fire. Paul was a great man of God. He had been the source of God’s salvation for all those who were on the ship. He should have been respected and honored. But he did not sit down, ready to be served. He got up to gather wood for the fire. He was ready to perform a menial act of service for those around him. Paul had

learned how to serve like Jesus did. Jesus said, "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mk 10:45).

In the second place, Paul had victorious faith like Jesus. As Paul was putting the wood on the fire, a viper, driven out by the heat, fastened itself on his hand. As we know, one bite from a viper is fatal to a human being. Paul could have died on Malta, so close to Rome. When the islanders saw the snake hanging from Paul's hand, they said to each other, "This man must be a murderer; for though he escaped from the sea, Justice has not allowed him to live" (4). Here we see that the islanders had a vague knowledge of God, for they believed in ultimate justice. But their thought world was very fatalistic. They were under the power of sin and death. The darkness of their thought world was almost palpable. It could have caused Paul to think fatalistically: "Oh no! After surviving the storm at sea, am I now going to die by this viper's bite?" Or, "I am a murderer. God is punishing me for killing Stephen."

What did Paul do? Look at verse 5. "But Paul shook the snake off into the fire and suffered no ill effects." Paul did not have any element of fatalistic thinking. He shook the snake off into the fire and suffered no ill effects. Paul had gospel faith. He believed the forgiveness of sins and eternal life in the kingdom of God. He believed God's promise of protection. So he was victorious over all the forces of darkness. Mark 16:18a says, "...they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all...." This promise is given to all who believe in Jesus and preach the gospel.

In the course of serving God, we sometimes experience unexpected viper attacks. We can feel the poison of fatalism enter our bloodstream. Others misunderstand and are ready to pronounce defeat. We learn from Paul to shake off the snake into the fire, trusting absolutely in God's forgiving grace and love that protects. We must claim victory over the darkness by faith in Christ. For example, our own sinful nature has been defeated by Christ. Romans 6:11 says, "In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus." We are no longer under the power of sin. In the grace of Christ we live a new life. We must shake off the vipers with absolute faith in God's love.

In the third place, Paul had the image of Jesus who heals the sick. The islanders expected Paul to swell up or suddenly fall dead. So they watched him carefully for a long time. But nothing unusual happened to him. Then they thought of him as a god. Anyway, their hearts were opened to Paul's message and ministry. Look at verses 7-10. The chief official of the island, called Publius, had an estate nearby. He welcomed Paul and his companions to his home and showed them hospitality. Publius' father was sick in bed with a fever and dysentery. Paul went in to see him. After prayer, Paul placed his hands on him and healed him. It was a miracle. It fulfilled Mark 16:18b: "...they will place their hands on sick people and they will get well." Then the rest of the sick on the island came to Paul. One by one he healed them all.

Paul was a blessing to the islanders. As a result, the islanders were happy to care for the needs of Paul and his companions. The islanders honored them and furnished supplies when they left. Through the beautiful scene on Malta, we are inspired by the glorious image of Christ in Paul. Like Paul, we must grow to maturity in our faith in Christ.

Third, Paul arrives in Rome and thanks God (11-16).

Paul and his companions were fully refreshed through God's grace poured out on them at Malta. When the weather became suitable for sailing, they put out to sea in an Alexandrian ship with the figurehead of the twin gods Castor and Pollux. Modern people would call them the Gemini twins. Their appearance

reminds us that the world was still under the influence of idols and the power of sin and death. It was a world that needed the gospel of Jesus most urgently.

From Malta, they sailed to Syracuse on the island of Sicily. Then they sailed to Rhegium on the Italian peninsula. Two days later they arrived at Puteoli, known as the port of Rome. Look at verse 14. "There we found some brothers who invited us to spend a week with them. And so we came to Rome." At last, Paul arrived in Rome. Paul first mentioned Rome after seeing God's great work in Ephesus. Acts 19:21 says, "After all this had happened, Paul decided to go to Jerusalem, passing through Macedonia and Achaia. 'After I have been there,' he said, 'I must visit Rome also.'" Paul was delayed by imprisonment and trials. But in Acts 23:11, the Risen Christ stood beside him and said, "Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome." Later, in the terrible storm, the Lord's angel said to him, "Do not be afraid Paul. You must stand trial before Caesar..." (Ac 27:24). At last, Paul was standing on Roman soil.

Look at verse 15. "The brothers there had heard that we were coming, and they traveled as far as the Forum of Appius and the Three Taverns to meet us. At the sight of these men Paul thanked God and was encouraged." The distance the brothers traveled to meet Paul was considerable. Many of them did not know Paul personally. But they recognized him as God's servant and honored his arrival. It was the work of God. God had gone ahead of Paul to begin world mission work in Rome. When Paul saw them, he thanked God and was encouraged.

Fourth, Paul preaches the gospel in Rome (17-31).

Paul did not waste time. Three days after his arrival, he called together the leaders of the Jews and talked with them (17-20). Paul's ministry in Jerusalem was not random. He followed God's order. He began with the Jews. It was according to his ministry principle, "First for the Jew, then for the Gentile." Paul wanted them to know that he was innocent. He was in prison because of Jewish political pressure. But he had not retaliated with a counter suit. He understood his imprisonment spiritually. It was because of the hope of Israel that he was in chains. Here the hope of Israel refers to the hope that the long awaited Messiah would come and save his people and establish the kingdom of God.

The Jews in Rome were already predisposed against Christianity. But they agreed to listen to Paul and came in large numbers to meet him (21-22). Look at verse 23b. "From morning till evening he explained and declared to them the kingdom of God and tried to convince them about Jesus from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets." Paul's message was the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is where God is King. This refers, first of all, to the hearts of men. Without the kingdom of God, men are ruled by sin and death. They are slaves of the devil. But whoever willingly accepts Jesus as the King sent by God, can receive the kingdom of God in his or her heart. All the power of sin and death is driven out; God rules with peace and love. At that time, the world was a Roman world. The Roman Empire was like a brute beast that crushed and devoured its victims and, at the same time, utterly corrupted its members. Nero was the Emperor. But Paul declared the kingdom of God in Rome. Paul hoped that the Jews in Rome would be Bible teachers and that God would use them to evangelize the Roman Empire.

Paul also tried to convince the Jews that Jesus is the Christ, sent by God. But Jesus was not the kind of Christ they wanted. Jesus came to save men from their sins through his death and resurrection. But the Jews wanted an economic or political messiah. A few of them believed, but most of them did not. What a terrible result it seemed to be.

How did Paul handle this? Paul understood the rejection of the Jews on the basis of God's word (25-28). It was the fulfillment of prophecy. There are no surprises to God. There is only the fulfillment of prophecy. In the time of rejection we must have eyes to see what God is doing based on his word. Paul saw where God's work and history were going. God's salvation was being sent to the Gentiles. As Simeon prophesied, Jesus is the Light to the Gentiles (Lk 2:32).

Look at verses 30-31. "For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ." Humanly speaking, Paul was a prisoner. He was confined under house arrest. He could not go fishing on the campus freely. But God sent him many Roman sheep, one after another, who came to see him. And Paul welcomed them. Paul preached the kingdom of God to them and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ. No doubt he taught them that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures. And God raised Christ from the dead on the third day according to the Scriptures. One by one, Roman citizens and soldiers received the forgiveness of sins and eternal life in the kingdom of God.

To human eyes, Paul's preaching the kingdom of God under Roman confinement seemed insignificant. But in God, Paul's ministry was a new beginning of world history. In the next three hundred years, through innumerable unnamed Christians, God turned the Roman Empire into Christendom. In 313 A.D. the Emperor Constantine declared Christianity to be the national religion. However, once Christianity became the religion of the Empire, it merged with Roman culture. Christians began to think of the kingdom of God as a better life on earth. They compromised their gospel message and moral and spiritual purity. Then God allowed the Roman Empire to be overrun by vandals and barbarians. Many thought Christianity had failed. But St. Augustine perceived God's purpose in this and wrote "The City of God." God's kingdom was not contained by the Roman Empire. God's kingdom had been advancing steadily through house churches like Paul's.

Since then, in every generation, the established institutions have failed and vanished. In our time, so many so-called mainline denominations of Christianity compromise with the culture and try to validate gay marriage. We must know that God's church is not confined in these corrupted old institutions. God's church is in the manger of baby Jesus. God's church is Paul's gospel preaching in the rented house in Rome. God's church is in the individual Christian homes throughout America in which men and women fear God, live a holy life, and preach the kingdom of God. Thus, we can see in Paul's house church the whole church of God. Let's read verse 31. "Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ."

The book of Acts ends here. In fact, it ends with a new beginning. Human history is always changing. But the work of God is flowing steadily from one generation to the next through the life-giving gospel of Jesus Christ. The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord. As a conclusion to Acts study, let's renew our gospel faith and world mission vision. Let's renew our commitment to house church ministry.

UBF USA and Canada has grown like a spreading vine. It now covers many cities and states. But in essence we are a house church ministry. We are a manger ministry. We must value quiet devotion to Christ in the house church more than a glamorous mass movement. We must highly value personal faith in Jesus and personal piety. We must keep up one-to-one Bible study. We must keep our message focused on the kingdom of God and the Lord Jesus Christ. As we do so, may God make North America a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.