

The Hope of Israel

Acts 28:11-22

¹¹ After three months we set sail in a ship that had wintered in the island, a ship of Alexandria, with the twin gods as a figurehead. ¹² Putting in at Syracuse, we stayed there for three days. ¹³ And from there we made a circuit and arrived at Rhegium. And after one day a south wind sprang up, and on the second day we came to Puteoli. ¹⁴ There we found brothers and were invited to stay with them for seven days. And so we came to Rome. ¹⁵ And the brothers there, when they heard about us, came as far as the Forum of Appius and Three Taverns to meet us. On seeing them, Paul thanked God and took courage. ¹⁶ And when we came into Rome, Paul was allowed to stay by himself, with the soldier who guarded him.

¹⁷ After three days he called together the local leaders of the Jews, and when they had gathered, he said to them, “Brothers, though I had 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 When they had examined me, they wished to set me at liberty, because there was no reason for the death penalty in my case. ¹⁹ But because the Jews objected, I was compelled to appeal to Caesar—though I had no charge to bring against my nation. ²⁰ For this reason, therefore, I have asked to see you and speak with you, since it is because of the hope of Israel that I am wearing this chain.” ²¹ And they said to him, “We have received no letters from Judea about you, and none of the brothers coming here has reported or spoken any evil about you. ²² But we desire to hear from you what your views are, for with regard to this sect we know that everywhere it is spoken against.” – Acts 28:11-22 ESV

After their shipwreck on Malta, the Roman centurion and his troops who had been assigned the task of delivering Paul to Rome, determined to spend the winter on the island. In the early spring, when the weather made safe travel possible, the centurion booked passage on a ship headed to Italy. Luke makes an interesting observation, commenting that the ship that would carry Paul on the last leg of his journey has a figurehead on the bow that represented the twin gods. This was a reference to the Greek gods, Castor and Pollux. We can't be sure why Luke chose to include this information, but it's almost as if he is trying to convey the irony of the situation. If you recall, back in chapter 14, when Paul and Barnabas had gone to Lystra and had healed a man with crippled feet, they were immediately lauded as gods, with the people shouting, “These men are gods in human form!” (Acts 14:11 NLT). They claimed that Barnabas was Zeus and Paul was Hermes. Well, Castor and Pollux were the sons born to Zeus as a result of his relationship with a human, Leda, queen of Sparta. According to Greek mythology, Zeus transformed his two human sons into gods and gave them the responsibility of providing for the safety of sailors. So, perhaps Luke found humor in the fact that the figurehead on the ship to carry Paul (Hermes) to Rome represented the two sons of Barnabas (Zeus). On top of that, these two gods (Castor and Pollux) were supposed to be the ones who protected sailors from

the storms at sea. Considering all that Luke and Paul had just endured on their journey to Rome, all of this would have come across as more than a bit ironic.

When they finally set foot on Roman soil at the port of Puteoli, they were greeted by fellow believers. We're not told how these people came to faith. But we know that, on the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples, there had been individuals from Rome in the crowd that heard them speaking in foreign languages.

*⁹ Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and **visitors from Rome**, ¹¹ both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians—we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God.” – Acts 2:9-11 ESV*

These visitors from Rome and elsewhere in Italy, were most likely Jews, who had come to Jerusalem for the celebration of Passover and the feast of Pentecost. And we know that more than 3,000 people came to faith as a result of Peter's impromptu sermon. It's likely that some of the visitors from Rome and other regions of Italy were among those who came to faith. So, they would have returned to Rome, ready to share the news of the gospel with their friends and family members. Regardless of how these people had come to faith, Paul and Luke found themselves surrounded by fellow believers as soon as they stepped off the ship. And they stayed with them for seven days.

Upon arrival in the capital city of Rome, Paul and Luke were once again greeted by fellow believers. This must have been a tremendous encouragement to these two men, who were far from home and who had just endured a great deal of pain and suffering to make it this far. What a powerful reminder this must have been to Paul of the unstoppable power of God's sovereign plan. Paul had grown used to arriving in a town and being the lone Christian, responsible for sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with people who had never heard His name before. But here he was, in the heart of the Roman empire, where no apostle had been before, and God had already been there. The gospel had already arrived, and the Spirit had begun His work.

One of the things we learn about Paul in this passage is his relentless desire to share the gospel with the Jews. Just three days into his stay in Rome, he called the leaders of the local Jewish congregation, desiring to share with them all that had gone on and why he was there. Paul was getting ahead of the game, preempting the Jewish leadership from Jerusalem, who had surely sent a contingent to Rome to represent their case against Paul before Caesar. Paul wanted to make sure that the local Jews heard his side of the story before the opposition had a chance to poison the well. And so, he related all that had happened in Jerusalem, assuring them of his innocence, and clearly presenting the basis for his imprisonment and presence in Rome: "it is because of the hope of Israel that I am wearing this chain" (Acts 28:20 ESV). Once again, he tied his arrest and imprisonment to the claim that Jesus was the hope of Israel: The Messiah. These Jews would have known that Paul was referring to the Messiah. The arrival of the Messiah was

something all Jews hoped, wished and prayed for. Even Jews living as far away as Rome, would have longed for the day when their long-awaited Messiah showed up and returned the people of Israel to their former state of glory. Those Jews living in the capital of Rome would have been in the minority, surrounded by the power and paganism of Rome. They had no temple. Every day they faced reminders of their own oppressed state and the weakened condition of their own nation. They were no longer a force to be reckoned with, as in the days of David and Solomon. The Romans and their gods were the bullies on the block.

It would have been hard for these people to maintain their hope in the Messiah while living so far from Israel. Their sense of anticipation would have been beaten down and driven from them by the daily affairs of life. With each passing day, their hope would have diminished, and their resignation would have increased. But Paul came bearing good news, and they desired to hear more. They admitted that they knew nothing of Paul's confrontations in Jerusalem and had received no visitors bearing news or words of ill will against Paul. But they expressed their desire to hear more, telling Paul, "we desire to hear from you what your views are, for with regard to this sect we know that everywhere it is spoken against" (Acts 28:22 ESV). They had heard about Jesus, but to them, he was nothing more than the martyred leader of a religious sect that had a less-than-ideal reputation. And yet, they were interested. Their curiosity had been piqued. Here was Paul, the messenger of the good news to the Gentiles, being invited by the Jews in Rome, to tell them more about Jesus, the hope of Israel. God works in mysterious ways.

This is Not the End

Acts 28:23-31

²³ *When they had appointed a day for him, they came to him at his lodging in greater numbers. From morning till evening he expounded to them, testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus both from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets. ²⁴ And some were convinced by what he said, but others disbelieved. ²⁵ And disagreeing among themselves, they departed after Paul had made one statement: "The Holy Spirit was right in saying to your fathers through Isaiah the prophet:*

²⁶ *"Go to this people, and say,
"You will indeed hear but never understand,
and you will indeed see but never perceive."*

²⁷ *For this people's heart has grown dull,
and with their ears they can barely hear,
and their eyes they have closed;
lest they should see with their eyes
and hear with their ears
and understand with their heart
and turn, and I would heal them.'*

²⁸ *Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen."*

³⁰ *He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him,
³¹ proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness
and without hindrance. – Acts 28:23-31 ESV*

As we prepare to wrap up this study on the Book of Acts, we come to Luke's concluding paragraphs covering Paul's arrival in Rome. In a sense, Luke doesn't complete the story. He leaves us hanging, with Paul in prison and his final fate left unstated. It's almost as if he was planning a sequel. The way he ends the book is much like the final episode in the first season of a Netflix TV series. It's a cliff hanger that leaves us wanting to know more. But the second season of Luke's "Acts of the Apostles", if he ever planned one, never aired.

What do know is that just three days after his arrival in Rome, Paul called for a meeting with the local Jewish leadership. He wanted to explain why he was there and what had happened in Jerusalem to necessitate his arrival as a prisoner of the Roman government. The local Jews had received no news regarding the events leading up to Paul's initial arrest. There had been no visits from the representatives of the Sanhedrin and, as a result, the Jews in Rome had no idea what Paul was talking about. But they wanted to hear more. And hear more they did. Luke tells us that Paul met with them from morning until evening, "testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus both from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets" (Acts

28:23 ESV). Paul may have been a prisoner of Rome, with a Roman guard attached to him at all times, but he never shirked from the commission given to him by Christ. He continued to share the gospel, doing everything in his power to persuade Gentiles and Jews that Jesus was Savior of the world. And Luke reveals that the crowd was divided over what they heard Paul say that day. Some believed, while others rejected his message. And Paul broke up the meeting when he quoted from the prophet Isaiah:

²⁶ *“Go to this people, and say,
“You will indeed hear but never understand,
and you will indeed see but never perceive.”*
²⁷ *For this people's heart has grown dull,
and with their ears they can barely hear,
and their eyes they have closed;
lest they should see with their eyes
and hear with their ears
and understand with their heart
and turn, and I would heal them.”* – Acts 28:26-27 ESV

Paul quoted from Isaiah 6:9-10, where God spoke to the prophet, providing him with a message concerning the people of Judah. God was warning Isaiah that they would not listen to a word he said. They would hear, but not understand. They would see, but not perceive. Why? Because they had hard hearts and deaf ears. And God inferred to Isaiah that their stubborn resistance to His message of repentance had been His doing. God could have softened their hearts, but He chose not to. He could have opened their eyes to see the reality of their situation and the incredible graciousness of God’s offer to take them back if they would repent. But He didn’t. And the people of Judah would eventually end up defeated by the Babylonians and taken into captivity.

And Paul directly tied this prophecy from the prophet of God to apply to the people of God living in his day. And Paul was not the only one who had used this passage to indict the Jewish people in the first century. Jesus Himself quoted it to His disciples. But right before He did, He told them, “You are permitted to understand the secrets of the Kingdom of Heaven, but others are not. To those who listen to my teaching, more understanding will be given, and they will have an abundance of knowledge. But for those who are not listening, even what little understanding they have will be taken away from them. That is why I use these parables...” (Matthew 13:11-13 NLT).

Jesus explained His parables to the disciples, but He didn’t do the same thing for the Jews. And the majority of them continued to reject His message regarding the Kingdom of God and His role as Messiah. And the same thing was true in Paul’s day. They were still wrestling with the idea that Jesus, the rabbi from Nazareth, who had been crucified by the Romans, had actually been the long-awaited Jewish Messiah. And they most certainly struggled with the concept that Jesus had been raised back to life by God, as proof that He had been who He had claimed to be.

Which is what led Paul to break the news to them that he had been sharing with other Jews all throughout his journey to Rome.

“Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.” – Acts 28:28 ESV

The majority of the Jews would not listen, but the Gentiles would. And Paul had seen that reality proved out time and time again in place after place. He had repeatedly gone to the Jews in every city he visited, and he had watched them reject his message and respond in anger at his audacity to insinuate that they needed salvation. And even during the two years that Paul remained in Rome, he would continue to preach the gospel to anyone who would listen, “proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance” (Acts 28:31 ESV).

Luke has brought his book full circle. He began it talking about the Kingdom of God, and he finished it the same way. In the opening lines of his history of the Christian church, Luke had told Theophilus that his gospel had been intended to deal “with all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen” (Acts 1:1-2 ESV). The Book of Acts had been written to pick up the story where the gospel had left off, when Jesus had “presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3 ESV). Jesus had spent His final days with the disciples, telling them about the Kingdom of God. And now, we see Luke closing out his book with Paul speaking about the Kingdom of God. As stated earlier, Luke doesn’t tell us what happened to Paul. He was still a prisoner of the Roman government. He had been brought to Rome, at great expense, to stand trial before Emperor Nero. But Luke doesn’t provide us with those details.

According to Clement of Rome, the Bishop of Rome from 88-98 A.D., the apostle Paul eventually died, but he also provided no details as to the means of his death.

5 Through envy Paul, too, showed by example the prize that is given to patience: 6 seven times was he cast into chains; he was banished; he was stoned; having become a herald, both in the East and in the West, he obtained the noble renown due to his faith; 7 and having preached righteousness to the whole world, and having come to the extremity of the West, and having borne witness before rulers, he departed at length out of the world, and went to the holy place, having become the greatest example of patience. – 1 Clement 5:5-7

Church tradition has long held that Paul was eventually beheaded by Nero, as part of his persecution of the church. But there is no compelling evidence that proves how and when Paul died. It seems that Luke was less interested in ending his story with the death of Paul, than eluding to the fact that the gospel was going to the Gentiles. Jesus had commissioned His disciples to take the gospel to the “ends of the earth.” Rome was not the end of the earth, but it was the center of the world at the time. And through its wide-spread influence and network

of roads to virtually all point in in the known world of that day, the gospel would continue to spread, and the church would continue to grow. Paul would eventually die, but the gospel would not. The apostles would all fade from view, passing away and out of the limelight. But the message of salvation, made possible by God's grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone would make its way around the world, completely transforming the landscape of society for generations to come. And God's message of redemption continues to spread. The world has gotten smaller. Advancements in technology and travel have made the remotest parts of the planet accessible and transmission of the gospel into every imaginable tongue, possible.

Interestingly enough, Paul wrote a letter to the church in Rome, where he reminded them that God had plans for the Jews. The very ones whose hearts He had hardened and whose eyes He had blinded to the truth, He will one day restore.

²⁵ I want you to understand this mystery, dear brothers and sisters, so that you will not feel proud about yourselves. Some of the people of Israel have hard hearts, but this will last only until the full number of Gentiles comes to Christ. ²⁶ And so all Israel will be saved. As the Scriptures say,

*"The one who rescues will come from Jerusalem,
and he will turn Israel away from ungodliness.*

*²⁷ And this is my covenant with them,
that I will take away their sins." – Romans 11:25-27 NLT*

God was not done in Paul's day. And God is not done in our day. Paul was in prison, but the gospel was not. Our world seems resistant and even hostile to the message of the gospel, but God is not done bringing in the "full number of the Gentiles." The history of the church did not conclude with the last chapter of Acts. It continues to be written and only God knows when and exactly how it will all end. But Paul gives us an insight into what that day will look like.

¹⁶ For the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a commanding shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet call of God. First, the believers who have died will rise from their graves. ¹⁷ Then, together with them, we who are still alive and remain on the earth will be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. Then we will be with the Lord forever. ¹⁸ So encourage each other with these words. – 1 Thessalonians 4:16-18 NLT