

Providence

I can hardly believe we have reached the final chapters of *Acts*! Looking back over all our weeks of digging in the Word together makes me sad that this is the last of our time together, at least for a short while! I am so very grateful that you have chosen to do this study with me. Without you it would have been a very lonely journey for me, and because of you I have striven to write the best study I can under the prayerful guidance of the Holy Spirit. He has a plan for each one of us, and just as he led me to write this study, he has led you to participate in it with me. His hands are all over these pages and our hearts. He led you to this study to learn and discover something new about himself and his passion for you! I pray that this study has led you into a deeper, more personal and enduring relationship with him!

Just as the Holy Spirit has had an active part in our study, he also actively impelled Paul on his final journey. We noticed that from the end of Paul's third journey there was a sense of the Holy Spirit driving Paul forward to Jerusalem, not just leading him, but almost propelling him physically forward. Despite all the good-intentioned warnings of his friends, Paul, devoted to his mission to share the Gospel, was compelled to follow the Lord's leading.

While the second half of *Acts* very much is a record of Paul's travels and work in the name of the Lord, it is imperative that we remember Luke's purpose in writing *Acts* was not to write a biography of Paul. It is the story of the spread of the Gospel and the conversion of hearts to God. As much as it is the continuation of a journey of faith for the Jewish believers – Paul, Peter, Barnabus, Stephen, and so many others, it is also the story of God drawing the Gentiles to himself. Making of them a kingdom of God united with their Jewish-Christian brethren that would endure and grow for generations to come.

A Perfect Storm

Last week we left off with Paul placing his future in the hands of the Roman authorities demanding his right to appeal his case before Caesar rather than allowing Governor Felix to hand him over to the Jews. Doing so would have been politically expedient for Felix in order to curry favor with the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem. Instead Paul's insistence to stand before Caesar sets the course for the final stage of the Lord's commission to Paul to share his testimony in Rome (Acts 23:11); as well as, the Lord's initial commission to the apostles to carry the Gospel to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).



Read Acts 27: 1-44 and answer the following questions.

As you are reading this passage follow Paul's sea voyage on the attached map.

Who was in charge of the vessel as well as the prisoners on board?

Who was with Paul? Who does the "us" in the narrative appear to include (v.2)?

What do we know about Aristarchus? See Acts 19:29, 20:4; Colossians 4:10 and Philemon 24.

What caused slow progress after they set sail from Myra?

What concern did Paul profess at Fair Havens?

What fateful course of action was decided upon?

Before reaching Phoenix, what happened?

What happened to cargo and some of the ship's tackle?

What did Paul reveal to those onboard (v.21-26)?

Who attempted to escape the ship in the life boat?

Why was it essential for them to stay on board?

What did Paul do to encourage those on board in verse 33-38?

Why did the soldiers want to kill the prisoners and who prevented their execution?

🔥 Why do you think the centurion wanted to “spare Paul’s life” (v.43)?

How many reached shore safely? (See also verse 37)

What seemingly supernatural or spiritual force appears to be at work? See the following verses for additional insight. What do these verses tell you about this spiritual force or truth at work?

Gen 50:19-20

Ex 14:4

Psalms 33:10-11

Eph 3:7-13

Phil 1:12-14

The Lord did not send Paul off alone to Rome. Chapter 27 marks the return of the “2nd person plural pronoun” narration, in other words, the narration shifts to “we”, as in “*we would sail to Italy*” (v.1). It can be assumed that Luke has re-joined Paul in this journey, as well as the mentioned Aristarchus (v.2). Aristarchus joined Paul from Thessalonica on the third missionary journey as Paul returned to Jerusalem. Aristarchus, described as a Macedonian, not a Jew, was a representative from the church in Thessalonica bringing an offering to the Jerusalem church. He was with Paul during the riot in Ephesus and travelled with Paul as he made his journey back to Jerusalem. He was present with Paul as Paul was repeatedly warned by friends not to return to Jerusalem. He accompanies Paul on his journey to Rome, and is mentioned by Paul in his letter to Philemon, written in 60 AD. Aristarchus is a “fellow-prisoner” with Paul during his imprisonment in Rome. Church tradition says that Aristarchus was put to death by Emperor Nero in Rome for his work to further the church. Paul would need the support and companionship of dear friends to bolster his faith and encourage him in the difficult days ahead. Once reaching Rome Paul and his friends would work tirelessly to build the church in Rome and its environs.

Verse 9 tells us it is “after the fast” and that sailing would be dangerous. The fast of which they speak is the Day of Atonement falling in September or October. The winter storms of this time of year would cloud the skies making navigation impossible, and the blowing squalls would render the seas treacherous. The perfect storm of 1991 off the eastern shore of North America was a nor’easter that combined with Hurricane Grace creating 75mile/hr plus winds and swells of over 100 feet. The fishing vessel *Andrea Gail* was lost at sea disappearing with her crew into the depths of the North Atlantic. This storm and the loss of the life aboard the *Andrea Gail* inspired the book and movie *The Perfect Storm*. Paul’s tempest-tossed sea voyage sailed straight into a similar storm called a *Euraquilo*.¹ Hurricane force winds swept in from the east and north-east engulfing the Mediterranean in what could only be compared to a perfect storm. As the ship is torn apart by nature and man in its battle against the raging storm, the survival of Paul and the whole ship’s complement of 276 crew and passengers, is truly miraculous and can only be attributed to the providence of God. God ordained that Paul would reach Rome and despite man’s best or worst, well-founded or misguided intentions, God’s plan would not be thwarted. The protective hand of the Holy Spirit was over not only Paul, but all who traveled with him. The angel of the Lord had promised Paul would stand before Caesar and to that end God also delivered all 276 from certain death, but only if they followed Paul’s instructions. In verse 30-32, we see an attempt of some of the sailors to desert the ship in the life boat. It was absolutely critical to the survival of all that the sailors remain on board. If the sailors escaped, there would be none left with the understanding of how best to maneuver through the storm and navigate the ship to the best location to ensure the survival of all. Paul once again encourages all on board assuring them they will survive this ordeal. He persuades them to revive their strength by taking nourishment; they would need all the strength they could muster. We see that Paul blesses the food and prays to God in thanksgiving and no doubt for the safety of all on board. As the majority on board is not Christian, but pagan, we must not view this breaking of bread with a Eucharistic intent. Paul prays over their meal as is common even among the pagans to give thanks to their own gods. Paul is making it evident to all on board that their survival of the storm will be completely by the grace of his God and his God alone.

Yet again Paul’s life is in peril as the soldiers plan to kill all the prisoners. If the soldiers allowed any prisoner to escape, their own life would be forfeit. The powers that be in Rome did not take lightly the escape of any prisoner and the penalty would be death to a soldier that allowed a prisoner to escape. Julius, the Centurion, was the highest ranking official on board and therefore could command the soldiers not to kill the prisoners. For whatever reason, Julius had come to respect Paul. His decision to preserve the life of the prisoners fulfilled Paul’s prediction that all would survive the shipwreck; as well as, ensuring Paul’s survival to further Paul’s ministry in Rome. At every turn we see the Lord’s hand guiding and leading every situation to accomplish his agenda.

Personal Reflection

Where in your life have you seen the providence of God at work?

¹ Word Pictures in the New Testament

“Snakes. Why did it have to be snakes?”

I am a huge Indiana Jones fan so I could not resist the allusion here. I love the adventure, the excitement, the foreign locations, Harrison Ford...And oh, how do I identify with Indiana and the snakes. If you don't know to what I am referring, it is the snake pit scene in *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark*. Indiana and his pal Sallah have to descend into a pit filled with snakes to retrieve a relic that will lead them to the Lost Ark. His fearful pal echoes Indiana's sentiments, "Asps, very dangerous." It is an asp, or venomous viper, that Paul encounters in this passage of scripture. I cringe at just the thought of it!



Read Acts 28:1-10 and answer the following questions.

Where have Paul and his companions found themselves after the shipwreck? Mark it on you Map.

What was the people's reaction to Paul's snake bite?

What did they expect to happen to him?

What did they think when he suffered no ill effects of the snake bite?

Why do you think he suffered no ill effects?

According to verse 2 how were they treated by the islanders?

Look ahead to verse 11, how long did Paul and his companions remain on Malta?

Starting in verse 2 and going all the way through verse 10, describe the hospitality of the islanders.

🔥 The healing of the father of the island's chief leader started a ministry of healing. What do you imagine this allowed Paul, Luke and Aristarchus to do?

A dear friend of mine had a very similar experience as Paul when she was weeding in her garden. Barehanded she reached in to grab a handful of weeds and as she pulled them out, a snake writhed in her grasp. According to her description, "she screamed like a little girl and ran into the house". If you knew my friend you would know that very little shakes her, and even fewer things send

her running and “screaming like a little girl”! But snakes do, and I am one hundred percent certain she doesn’t weed without gardening gloves anymore!

While my friend wasn’t bitten by that garden snake, Paul was, and by scriptural account it was by a venomous viper.² Those who witnessed this incident believed the snake to be venomous and thought to themselves that Paul must have been guilty of a great crime like murder for Justice to take his life after the miraculous survival of storm and shipwreck. Notice it is Justice with a capital “J”. They are referring to the pagan goddess Nemesis (or Justitia, from Latin). The islanders mistakenly believe that Paul’s immunity to the snake bite reveals him to be a god, not recognizing the true antidote to the snake bite being Paul’s God. Again we see providence at work when the serpent of old attempts to kill, steal or destroy that which God has ordained for the salvation of many, in this case Paul’s testimony. A simple snake bite could have derailed Paul’s future ministry had it been of his own endeavor. But Paul’s ministry was God’s agenda.

If you think I am reading too much into this snake thing, let’s take a closer look at snakes in the Word of God.



Read Genesis 3 and answer the following questions.

What does the snake steal from Adam and Even?

What does the snake destroy?

Who or what is killed in this passage – figuratively and literally? See verse 21 and 22.

Who does the snake embody?

Recall from Homework Lesson 6 focusing on Acts 16:16-18 where Paul heals the girl of the python-spirit, what did that python spirit do before Paul cast it out of the girl?

Again, who can we say this python-spirit comes?

Next, read the account of Moses and the bronze snake in Numbers 21:4-9.

What was the effect of the snakes on the Israelites?

Why did God send the venomous snakes against the Israelites?

²Luke used a term (*echidna*) that generally denotes a “viper,” a poisonous snake; but it has been pointed out that today there are no poisonous snakes on Malta. Obviously the current situation on the island would have little to say about conditions there in the first century. Malta has been heavily populated through the centuries, and poisonous snakes would have had little chance for survival.—New American Commentary

How did God deliver the Israelites from the snakes?

What do you think the Israelites learned in this experience?

What further meaning does John 3:14-15 give to this passage with the bronze snake?

To whom must we turn our gaze for healing and deliverance?

As Moses and the Israelites travelled through the Sinai Peninsula, the Israelites grumbled against the Lord displaying their lack of faith and resentment. This lack of faith and resentment would lead into a rebellion against God, and eventually death if allowed to persist. Their very existence was dependent upon God's leading and protection. If they rebelled against God, they would reject his authority forfeiting his protection. This would lead not only to physical death in the desert, but also spiritual death. In judgment against their behavior God sent a plague of snakes against them. A bite from a venomous snake resulted in a slow and agonizing death. But God also provided deliverance from these snakes. He instructed Moses to make a bronze snake and raise it up on a pole. When those bitten by a snake lifted their gaze to the bronze snake they were healed. They were not healed by what appears to be an idol, but rather by faith in God. Through Moses, God told them to look at the bronze snake for healing and deliverance. Their healing was spiritual as well as physical. They were delivered from death by snake bite as well as from the sin of turning away from God.

While God does use a bronze snake to deliver the Israelites, most of the time snakes, vipers and serpents represent Satan. In fact Jesus calls the Pharisees and teachers of the law "vipers" because they spew a poison that will lead the people away from God and away from salvation to spiritual death. Whether in the form of a snake, or the pagan Python god, or the human form of viper-like Pharisees and teachers of the law, Satan attempts to steal, kill and destroy the faithful of God. What Satan meant for evil and Paul's destruction, God used to launch a healing ministry in Malta opening the way for the Gospel to be preached.

The healing of Publius' father and many on the island is a miraculous sign that God was with Paul. These miraculous signs point to the presence of the Holy Spirit at work to win Gentiles to faith in God. As before and throughout Paul's missionary journeys, miraculous signs and healings provide the opportunity for the Gospel to be shared. As Paul, and likely the physician Luke and Aristarchus, commenced a healing ministry on the island, no doubt they also started a gospel ministry, as well. While scripture does not tell us whether or not the people to whom Paul and his companions ministered came to faith, they were grateful for his presence and healings. No doubt Paul left a strong impression on the chief official of the island just as he had with the centurion, Julius. Such a strong impression, that the islanders furnished Paul and his friends with all the supplies they would need for the three months spent on Malta and for their journey on to Rome. The repeated mention of generous hospitality in this

passage draws a parallel with the Christians in Sidon (27:3) who helped Paul and his companions initially by providing for their needs on the voyage to Rome. These islanders appear to be a fertile soil where the Word of God can be planted to flourish. Surely the potential for these pagans to embrace Christianity is greater here than among many of the Jewish communities Paul previously encountered. The generosity of the islanders will stand in stark contrast to Paul's reception by the Jews in Rome.

Rome

We have one final passage before we can rest from our travels with Paul. I must admit to being a little travel weary! Thankfully there is always rest and restoration with the Lord and his Word. As you begin today's scripture study, take a few minutes before the Lord to thank him for not only this journey in his Word, but your own journey as well. I'm sure that you too could write a history of the Acts of the Holy Spirit as the spirit moved and shaped your own life, weaving together a tale of God's providence and provision to inspire others to faith in Christ Jesus! God bless you in your studies today.



Read Acts 28:11-31 and answer the following questions.

Trace Paul's journey from Malta to Rome on your map.

Who met Paul and his companions when they arrived in Rome?

For what do you imagine Paul gave thanks?

Under what arrangements was Paul to live in Rome?

Why did Paul want to meet with the Jews in Rome?

What is the "hope of Israel" for which Paul is in chains?

Had the Jews in Rome heard anything about Paul and the Jews in Jerusalem?

What was their response to Paul's request to speak with them?

What did Paul use to convince the Jews that Jesus was the Messiah? To what result?

🔥 Why has God's salvation been sent to the Gentiles? What is it they will listen to?

How long does Luke tell us he lived in Rome?

To whom would he preach?

How did he preach?

What evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit do you perceive in this passage?

Paul is greeted by Christian brothers who had travelled no small distance to meet Paul upon his arrival. Scripture tells us that some have come as far as the Forum of Appius, a town 43 miles to the south of Rome, while others came from the town of Three Taverns, 35 miles south of Rome. Certainly being met by Christian brethren upon his arrival did much to encourage Paul. The Gospel had been previously brought to Rome by Jews who witnessed the Pentecost miracles and witness of Peter as mentioned in Acts 2:10. They would have taken the Gospel home with them, sharing it among family and friends. Paul wrote his letter to the Romans ten years before his arrival there. Surely there had been correspondence between Paul and the faithful in Rome in the years between Paul's conversion and his arrival. As Paul's journey had been delayed by storm and shipwreck, he must have sent word to the believers of his imminent arrival (perhaps from Rhegium), certainly their meeting at the port was not coincidental.

As had always been Paul's custom, he sought out and requested a meeting with the Jews in Rome. His first priority was unquestionably to present the gospel, but before doing so he inquired as to whether they had heard of him from the Jews in Jerusalem. At his first meeting with the Jews, Paul established that he was innocent of any charges of abusing Jewish customs, and that he was found innocent by the Roman authorities in Judea. He made it clear that his only recourse to escape the unjust activities of the Jews in Jerusalem was to appeal to Caesar. He also made it clear that his intention was not to bring a case against the Israel, but only that he wanted to clear his own name in an acquittal.

The foremost purpose in asking for an audience with the Jews in Rome was to talk about "*the hope of Israel*". In Acts 26:6-7 Paul said to King Agrippa, "*And now it is because of my hope in what*

God has promised our fathers that I am on trial today. This is the promise our twelve tribes are hoping to see fulfilled as they earnestly serve God day and night.” The hope of Israel was not just the resurrection that many Jews³ looked forward to. It was the fulfillment of the promises of the Torah and Book of the Prophets made by God to Israel. All Jews firmly believed God would send a Messiah like Moses or David to liberate Israel from its oppressors. Paul firmly believed that Messiah had come in the person of Jesus of Nazareth offering something greater than just deliverance from the oppression of Rome. He steadfastly believed that Jesus would return to establish Himself as king of Israel *and* Lord of all nations⁴.

The response Paul received from the Jews was anything but enthusiastic. They were neither hot nor cold. They were only interested in hearing what Paul had to say because of the negative reports they’d heard against the Christians. They invited him to speak with the assembly again only because of their curiosity about this “sect”. Even though more Jews came to hear him speak the second time and Paul spoke persuasively from morning till evening making his case from the scriptures, only a few believed, many did not and several quarreled amongst themselves. Hardly a rousing response. Paul concluded his testimony before the Jews quoting a prophesy of Isaiah, saying:

*"You will be ever hearing but never understanding;
you will be ever seeing but never perceiving."
For this people's heart has become calloused;
they hardly hear with their ears,
and they have closed their eyes"*

(Acts 28:26-27)

Paul furthermore, declared his resolve to take the message of God’s salvation to the Gentiles, because they will listen and receive it (v.28). Some manuscripts include here a verse 29 that gives us the response of the Jews to Paul’s final statement: *“After he said this, the Jews left, arguing vigorously among themselves.”*⁵ Whether or not Luke originally included this statement in his manuscript, the response seems in line with similar responses of the Jews to Paul’s determination to take God’s salvation to the Gentiles (c.f., Acts 22:21,22).

The final words recorded by Luke reveal the presence of the Holy Spirit at work transforming, building and furthering the church in Rome through the hard work and determination of Paul. *Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ (v.31)*. God’s agenda is fulfilled as is his promise to Paul: Paul is sharing his testimony in Rome, and through the power and protection of the Holy Spirit he is able to do so boldly and without hindrance.

I have a feeling there was precious little that would keep Paul from proclaiming God’s salvation to all. He had endured beatings, stoning, riots, imprisonment, betrayal and unjust treatment at the hands of the Jews; trials before mobs and kings; he endured dangerous sea voyages, shipwrecks, snake bites,

³ Not all Jews believed in a resurrection of the dead. This was the divisive issue that incited the uproar between the Pharisees and Sadducees when Paul spoke before the Sanhedrin in Acts 23.

⁴ BKC

⁵ This verse has been pulled from most Western translations for lack of evidence for its inclusion in the best Greek manuscripts.

and treacheries of every sort to bring the Gospel to Rome. Christians had inhabited Rome from the early days of the church, some even present at Pentecost (2:10). Paul wrote the book of Romans a decade before he travelled there to encourage those in the faith to stand firm, the book itself a careful and detailed statement of faith. For two years Paul lived under house arrest, unable to move about the city freely, but able to receive visitors. From his home he taught and preached all who would come to him. From Rome he wrote the letters to the Ephesians, Colossians and Philippians, commonly called his "Prison Letters". He also wrote epistles to Philemon, Timothy and Titus. Luke continued with Paul in Rome and received many visitors including Timothy, Aristarchus, Mark (John Mark), and many others mentioned by name in Paul's letters. In Philippians 1:13 Paul even mentions witnessing to the Roman guards and being involved in their faith.

Acts doesn't tell us the rest of Paul's story. Tradition holds that Paul was released after two years whereupon he set of a fourth missionary journey. There is no record of a trial before Caesar, and no indication of a suit filed against him. He was likely acquitted. Governor Felix and King Agrippa both claimed there was nothing with which to bring him to trial. In his letter to the Philippians Paul indicates an imminent release and desire to carry the gospel either further afield, or to return to visit established churches in Asia (Greece and Turkey). In his letters he mentions places he desired to travel, but it is unknown where he went. Some believe he may have traveled as far as Spain. The burning of Rome brought about violent persecution against Christians. It is likely then that Paul was imprisoned again in Rome. From that dark dungeon is where he wrote his last letter, 2 Timothy. He was executed in Rome in the year 66 AD.

Paul's faithfully fulfilled his mission to take the Gospel to the ends of the earth. But it cost his freedom. The Gospel brings deliverance to those who hear it, accept it, and actively live it, -- in the next life. That is the promise. Paul did everything Jesus asked of him, but he was not delivered from his chains, or from ultimately being executed. The book of Acts shows us that when we faithfully do Jesus' work, His Kingdom will spread. And even when the church is persecuted, the Kingdom will spread. Perhaps it is in times of persecution that our testimony about Jesus is most effective. Paul, Peter, James, Stephen and many others were all willing to forfeit their life for the Kingdom of God. Perhaps it is this willingness to give up one's freedom, one's life that most effectively illustrates to others the value we place on our faith. The Book of Acts shares the story of the beginnings of the church and how it rapidly infected the entire Roman Empire in one generation. It is a story of the triumph of the Gospel, not of those who carried the Gospel. As long as the disciples and Apostles were faithful in their work, the Gospel triumphed. The deliverers of the message did not achieve worldly fame and fortune for their hard work, but they did receive the promises of Christ. Something much more valuable.

The book of Acts is the story of the Spread of the Gospel and the history of the early church under the influence of the Holy Spirit. At the beginning of our study together I made the case that this book should be entitled *Acts of the Holy Spirit*, for it is through the power of the Holy Spirit that early church heroes like Peter, Stephen, James and Paul were able to carry the good news of the saving power of Jesus Christ beyond Judea and Samaria, to Antioch, Ephesus, and eventually Rome. From these major cities of the Roman Empire the Gospel would spread to the ends of the earth. The Holy Spirit transformed lives of ordinary men and women, Jew and Gentile alike, from all walks of life as it spread

Empowered by the Holy Spirit

farther and wider than anyone could ever have imagined. When Jesus opened the gates to the Kingdom of God in the Judean countryside, no one could ever have fathomed his intention to have his disciples witnessing to the ends of the earth resulting in 2,000 years of witnessing, testifying, hoping, praying, worshiping, praising, encouraging, and believing – all brought into motion by the gentle breath of the Holy Spirit on the likes of you and me.

Personal Reflection

At the beginning of our lesson today I suggested reflecting on how the Spirit has acted in your life to revealing his presence, provision and providence. How has he used you to inspire others to faith?