

Acts 28

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[0 : 00] Turn to Acts chapter 28. And we come to the last in our series in Acts. We've been in it pretty much for a year. We started it at the start of last September.

And so it is, isn't it? I always feel slightly emotional when you come to the end of a book like this. And I found preaching Acts very, very difficult.

And yet it's been really good for me. And I hope you've found it the same. There's lots of material to get through, isn't there? How do you handle those big kind of narratives? And yet I wish in many ways I could kind of go back and start again.

I know the book a bit better now. But we're not going to do that. We come to the end of Acts, but this isn't the end of Paul. We read nothing about the death and the martyrdom of the Apostle Paul. Many believe, and I think rightly, that Paul was released from this imprisonment about two years later. He was kind of released during the reign of Nero.

[1 : 03] You know, the emperor who fiddled while Rome burned. We'll never know for certain, but there's some compelling reasons, I think, for believing that he was released. And when he was released, I think that's the period where he wrote the pastoral letters of 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus.

Fits with that stage of his life. This period ends with him in Rome. That's the end of the book of Acts. It's deliberate. The book of Acts has been about the movement of the gospel.

It's been about how the church of the risen and ascended Lord Jesus Christ is unstoppable. So do you remember where it started? It started in the Jewish capital, didn't it? In Jerusalem. And it ends with the capital of the Gentile world, Rome.

It begins in Jerusalem. And it ends in Rome. Chapter 1, verse 8. Do you remember? That's really the content page of the book. Where the risen and ascended Christ says to the apostles, You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in Judea and in Samaria and the ends of the earth.

And so the central statement, the key of Acts chapter 28, is in verse 14. And Luke gives you the climax of the book. And so we came to Rome.

[2 : 23] It's the climax of all that God has been doing in the apostle Paul. There's four scenes in the chapter. Verses 1 and 10. Verses 1 to 10, you've got the three months that Paul and his companions spent in Malta.

And there's a shipwreck there washed up on the shore. And after three months in Malta, after great hospitality, and verse 11, they set sail in a ship because they'd wintered on the island.

Why did they stay there for so long? Well, three months. Bad weather for sailing. I expect they needed a bit of courage to get back out on the sea. But then they set out on their journey to Italy.

Verses 11 to 16 is the second scene. It describes their journey to Rome. And it ends with the kind of party living in Rome.

And Paul is under house arrest. He's allowed to live by himself. Verse 16, with a soldier to guard him. Scene 3 is verses 17 to 28. And it's an encounter once again with the Jewish leaders.

[3 : 28] Verse 17. After three days of arriving in Rome, he's called his breath. He calls together the local leaders of the Jews. And when they gathered, he said to them, Brothers, though I'd done nothing against our people or the customs of our fathers, yet I was delivered as a prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of Rome.

And he goes on. He speaks to them until the end of verse 28. And then scene 4 is verses 29 to 31. For two years, Paul remains in Rome under house arrest.

He lived at his own expense. And he welcomed all who came to him. Four sections. The experience on Malta. The journey to Rome.

The encounter with the Jews in Rome. And two years living under house arrest. And he preaches and teaches Jesus Christ. And the book finishes, doesn't it, with that wonderful little phrase, with all

boldness and without hindrance.

Four sections. But I think there are two themes. The first theme, well both themes run right the way through this chapter. The first theme is the theme of God's faithfulness to Paul.

[4 : 40] And the second theme is Paul's faithfulness to God. The faithfulness of God. And the faithfulness of Paul.

Let's see, the faithfulness of God to Paul. In our opening verses, you've got this experience, a continuing experience that Paul has had throughout the book of Acts. Paul has experienced, amidst all the troubles and all the persecutions and all the opposition and all the false accusations, the unchanging faithfulness of God to him.

In so many ways. God had made so many promises to the apostle. And right the way through the account, God has been faithful to his promises.

He's faithfully looked after the apostle Paul. He's provided for him. He has blessed him. He's fulfilled everything that he's covenanted to do for him.

You find it in the beginning of the chapter. And this group, this party of people, who've come on the ship from Malta. And they meet the native people. Do you see what it says?

[5 : 51] It says they were shown unusual kindness. And they built a fire. They welcomed us all. There was shelter, because it was raining and cold.

And Paul has the experience with these Maltese... Maltese... Maltese... Maltese is... He has this great experience with these Maltese people...

Of extraordinary, unusual kindness. And it's another evidence, isn't it, of God faithfully dealing with Paul in all his experiences. In the midst of trial and difficulty and shipwreck and impending disaster and unfair accusation, God shines through as a God of absolute faithfulness.

That's what we've seen. He perseveres with the Apostle. He preserves him from danger. You see this in that strange incident, don't you, with the snake in verse 3.

And they gather up sticks for the fire. And they didn't notice there's a viper. There's a snake hidden away. And it bites Paul on the hand. Paul is under threat. He's in some kind of danger.

[7 : 02] And the people expose us, don't they, immediately to their view of what God is like. What's their view of God? Can you see it? Their view of God is that he is an impersonal, superstitious God.

And these people have that contrast, don't they? They think, well, Paul, you must have done something wrong. They're very superstitious. And that is contrasted to us with this view of God that is personal, loving, and faithful.

And fatherly. The care that Paul experiences from God, day and night, the living God whom he serves. The islanders, they see this viper hanging from his hand.

And do you remember the story? He shakes it into the fire. And they say, don't they, immediately the viper fastens on Paul's hand. Ah, he's been a murderer. The sea hasn't got him, so justice has finally caught up with him.

What goes around comes around. He must have done something wrong. Look at verse 4. The ESV rightly has justice with a capital letter. Because that is the impersonal view of God that they have.

[8 : 13] He's escaped from the sea. He's escaped from the sea, so justice has caught up with him. Fate has got him in the end. Paul shakes his hand into the fire.

And as they watch the snake curl up and die, they discover that Paul has survived. And then they swing, don't they, these Maltese people, they swing from one extreme to the other.

And they deify him. They say he survived the snake. He must be a God, verse 6. And so can you see, these people, they have no concept, do they, of a loving, gracious, unchanging, faithful, all-powerful Heavenly Father.

Who's dealing graciously with his servant. What they have is this impersonal, this superstitious view of what God is like. And Paul is experiencing, isn't he, the faithfulness of God, preserving him and keeping him.

And caring for him in the midst of whatever circumstances he goes through. Notice in verse 7 how the chief Roman official provides hospitality to them.

[9 : 25] Verse 7, now in the neighbourhood of that place were lands belonging to the chief man of the island, namely Publius. Who received us and entertained us hospitably for three days.

He was the man whom God was going to use to give to Paul the supplies for the rest of the journey. Verse 10, they honoured us greatly. And when we were about to sail, they put on board whatever we needed.

That link, that generosity comes not only through Paul's hospitality, but through Paul's apostolic gift of healing. Look at verse 8.

It happened that this guy's dad, Publius' father, lay sick with a fever and dysentery. And Paul visited him and prayed. And putting his hands on him, healed him. The word that Luke uses there literally is, Publius' father received medical attention.

Luke is a doctor, isn't he? You wonder whether it's Luke and the Apostle Paul combining together in some kind of healing ministry. They use Luke's medical skills and Paul's apostolic gift.

[10:33] And he laid hands on them and they were restored. Verse 10, all their needs have been supplied as they go on to the next leg of the journey. And again, can you see the key to all of what God is doing?

God is faithfully and graciously and kindly supplying all their needs. All the needs of his children. He is keeping his apostle in the hollow of his hand.

We see that in the next stage, the next episode. The journey to Rome in verses 11 to 16. Notice how graciously God provides for the apostle.

The particular ways he provides for them. When they arrive at Puteoli in the end of verse 13. Can you see it? Putting in at Syracuse, we stayed there for several days. And from there we made a circuit and arrived at Regian.

And after one day a south wind sprang up and on the second day we came to Puteoli. And they go on to these two towns that are about 30, 40 miles apart from Rome.

[11:36] And there, verse 14, we found brothers and were invited to stay with them for seven days. And so we came to Rome. What's the reason behind those details?

Why is it that God so ordained those circumstances? It was that God recognised, didn't he, that the apostle Paul needed encouragement. And so he brings these brothers, he brings these believers to meet with him.

And Paul thanked God and at the end of verse 15 he is encouraged by them. Can you see, laced throughout this chapter is the thoughtfulness of the living God.

It's the personal touch of his faithfulness that reaches into the ordinary lives. The ordinary daily lives. Here is someone who greatly needs to be encouraged by God.

And God provides him the people that will bring him this encouragement. And not only does God show his faithfulness in the provision that he makes, but in the promises he fulfills. Look at verse 16.

[12:44] When Paul got to Rome he was allowed to live by himself with a soldier to guard him. That's a very significant thing, isn't it? Several times over we've seen in the narrative, God has been speaking with the apostle.

And encouraging him to believe that come what may, whatever the circumstances may seem to the contrary, Paul you are going to Rome. So chapter 23 and verse 11, Paul has given that really clear promise.

The following night the Lord stood by him and said, Take courage, for as you've testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you will do so in Rome. And the circumstances that occur from chapter 23, verse 11, to chapter 28 are pretty horrific.

But they are the living God unfolding his purposes and his plans. And dealing with men and women and governors and accusers and storms and circumstances so that in everything God's purpose may be fulfilled.

All the problems, all the false accusations, all the difficulties, God is at work in the midst of them. And it is a glorious thing to know God like that.

[14:08] It is a glorious thing to have this God as your God. And so I need to ask you this morning, don't I, what is your picture of God?

Who is the God whom you know? Is he the vague, impersonal picture of justice or fate or luck? Who gives you what you deserve? But what goes around comes around. Is it that superstitious view of God that the people had?

Or is it the personal knowledge of a living God who's come to us in the person of his son, the Lord Jesus Christ, and he transforms life? And he is working out the unfolding pattern of his purposes of a loving Heavenly Father.

And if you know that God, it will bring you poise and peace and sufficiency and contentment into your life.

[15:22] Do you know God in this way? How wonderful it is to be able to discover the faithfulness of God as it is revealed here.

And that's not all, is it? Because when you get to Rome with these promises in chapter 23 and chapter 27, Paul is given this special privilege.

Look at verse 16. He's allowed to live by himself with a soldier to guard him. It's a remarkable situation. It's as if Paul has been put in Rome as an ambassador to Jesus.

And he calls people to his residence. And they gather from all over this capital city of the world to come to him and to come to here. He calls people to his residence.

He ministers to the Jews. He preaches fearlessly to them. And yet he's in a house with a soldier to guard him, probably chained to him. Do you notice that verse 20?

[16:27] For this reason, therefore, I've asked to see you and speak with you. And since it is because of the hope of Israel that I'm wearing this chain. Scholars think, don't they, that the Roman soldier has actually chained to him at this point.

Paul is bound to a Roman soldier. You can imagine this poor Roman soldier didn't have the vaguest clue when Paul was brought into the house what was going to happen to him.

When he clocked on for his shift that first day, little did he know who he was going to be chained to. And there were two Covenanter brothers.

Big units. Massive, burly, strong men. And these Covenanter brothers, they had battled in Scotland for Christ's crown and covenant.

They wanted a stand for the freedom to worship Jesus Christ. They were massive. Absolutely massive. And they were taken, one of them was taken prisoner by the English soldiers.

[17:33] And they chained him to one of the brothers. His mother said to his brother, and when he came back, Malcolm, they've taken Davy away and chained him to an English soldier.

Malcolm and Davy were known as men of powerful spiritual impact. Whoever met them was slightly in awe of them because they were colossal physical figures, but they preached Christ fearlessly.

And Malcolm said to his mother, heaven help the man who's chained to Davy. And I expect it was something like that for the soldier chained to the Apostle Paul, wasn't it?

Heaven help the man who was chained to the Apostle Paul. He would hear the gospel in different ways to different people applied to him. And so Paul continued the ministry that God had given him. And so here is this reminder right at the end of Acts of the faithfulness of God to his people. But secondly, as we finish the book of Acts, we see the remarkable faithfulness of the Apostle Paul to God.

[18:37] The faithfulness of Paul to God. The very qualities that God reveals in his dealings with Paul are reproduced in Paul's life.

The faithfulness of God is mirrored in Paul's faithfulness to God. That is, all of God's dealings with this man have not kind of brushed lightly off his character.

They've gone deeply into his spirit. And what he had known of the faithfulness and the kindness of God began to be mirrored and pushed out in his own life.

And here he is in his ministry in Rome from verse 17. Just notice his zeal. Three days after he arrives in Rome, he calls together the leaders of the Jews.

And Paul is being faithful to what he recognized as the pattern and the purpose of God in his ministry. When he wrote to the Romans, do you remember? That great theme verse of the book of Romans, the gospel is the power of God to salvation.

[19:42] To everyone who believes. And we stop there, don't we? But the verse goes on, to the Jew first and then to the Gentile. Wherever he went in Acts, do you remember the pattern? Paul goes to the synagogue first.

He goes to the plead with the Jewish people. And only when they turn away from him and refuse the message, he says, then I will go to the Gentiles. But here he addresses himself to the Jewish leaders.

And after he's described his own experience of being arrested in Jerusalem and being handed over to the Romans, verse 21, they arranged to meet him. And they said to him, well, we've received no letters from Judea about you.

And none of the brothers coming here has reported or spoken any evil of you. They arranged to meet him on a certain day. Then they come in larger numbers to the place where he was staying.

Can you see the sheer faithfulness of his ministry?

He witnessed to them. And that appears, doesn't it, to have been the characteristic of these two years in Rome. He bore witness to Christ. And whatever they did to him, wherever he went, however they tried to confine him and crush him, he bore witness to Christ.

[21 : 05] After the service, somebody gives you two pints of water. And as you carry the two pints of water, one of the children running around knocks into you. What happens with full pints of water?

What happens? The water comes out, doesn't it? And so this is the apostle Paul. He is so full of the faithfulness of God and the kindness of Jesus Christ that when he is jostled, when he is struck, what comes out of the glasses?

The Lord Jesus Christ, isn't it? Both in private and in public, he speaks and he witnesses tirelessly. Out of the abundance of the heart, Jesus says, the mouth speaks.

And so Paul speaks of Christ. Verse 23, when they appointed a day for him, they came to him at his lodging in greater numbers. From morning to evening, he expounded to them, testifying to them the kingdom of God.

He speaks continually during the whole period that he's in Rome. He was tireless for two years. Verse 31, he lived there two whole years at his own expense and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.

[22 : 24] And so with that zeal and eagerness and willingness, that zeal marks the apostle Paul. It would have been so easy, wouldn't it, for him to make the excuse, I've been benched, I'm out of the public frame, it would have been so easy for him to make that excuse, well, I'm bound, what can I do?

I'm in chains, I'm confined in this situation. Don't you know, I'm the leader of the church and yet I'm confined within these four walls. But in fact, what we see, like the pint glass, whenever he's jostled, Christ spills out.

this tireless zeal, which has been given to him, desiring to be faithful. The second thing that marks is faithfulness, it's not only in the level of his commitment, the way that he's ready to be spent for God, but it's revealed in how he witnessed.

Can you see he witnessed biblically? Luke is really insistent on this, isn't he? He says in verse 23, from morning till evening, he expounded to them, testifying to them the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus, both from the law of Moses and from the prophets.

Paul found that some of them were convinced, others did not believe and they disagreed amongst themselves and they began to leave. And after Paul sees them leaving, he makes this statement, this final statement from the prophet Isaiah.

[23 : 57] Can you see it? The Holy Spirit was right in saying to your fathers through Isaiah the prophet. And then he quotes part of Isaiah chapter 6.

The important point to grasp here is this vital area of Paul's faithfulness being wed, being tied to the Bible as the content that he declared concerning Christ.

The focus of his ministry was Jesus but the place from which he taught them about Jesus was the Holy Scriptures. He taught them tirelessly. He taught them biblically.

And do you notice, he taught them with a faithfulness which was no doubt profoundly costly. I've no doubt that Paul found it extremely costly to quote what he did to his own nation, to the Jewish people.

He tells us, doesn't he, in the letter to the Romans, that he has a special love for the Jewish people. It's a striking thing. He says, in Romans 9 verse 1, I'm speaking the truth in Christ.

[25 : 04] I'm not lying. My conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in heart. for I wish that I myself were accursed and I were cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh.

So here is a man who's bearing witness to the Lord Jesus, testifying to the Lord Jesus and he doesn't do it in a cool and detached way. He's saying, I've got anguish of heart for my brothers and sisters.

In fact, I'm prepared that I would be accursed so that you might believe this message. In order that you might find salvation, it is incredible passion.

And that spirit seems to be the driving force of the apostles' evangelism. He was deadly in earnest. And yet he's ready, isn't he, to speak to them with an extraordinary degree of faithfulness and thoroughness as he takes the word of God and he explains it and he applies it to them.

The Holy Spirit spoke the truth to your forefathers. When he said, through Isaiah the prophet, go to this people and say, you will indeed hear but you'll never understand.

[26 : 25] You will indeed see but you'll never perceive. For this people's heart has grown dull and with their ears they can barely hear and with their eyes they have closed lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their hearts and turn and I would heal them.

They hardly hear with their ears. They've closed their eyes. The apostle is taking up this scripture from Isaiah chapter 6 and he applies it to the people of Israel in front of him of his own generation like Isaiah had applied it to his generation and he's saying to them and he's saying to us it is possible to hear God's word Sunday by Sunday and it not soften but harden you.

The picture is of calloused of being calloused. You know if you work in the garden we've got kind of city hands it's such a thing as minister's hands aren't there kind of soft wet minister's hands but if you work in the garden and you work with a spade and you work with it all day what happens your skin bits of it gets hard doesn't it?

It gets calloused so you go to a country congregation and you shake a farmer's hand and a farmer's hands they're rough and they're hard and there's not feeling so they're so calloused you could get a pin in a farmer's hand and you could put the pin into the farmer's hand into the skin but it wouldn't have an effect would it because the skin is so hard you can't get through very easily you don't easily penetrate a farmer's hand and that's a serious thing I'm sure if it kind of goes on and on and on doesn't it?

But in a spiritual condition it's more serious isn't it? It's desperately serious the apostle Paul on the prophet Isaiah is saying you can hear God's words so often and you can hear it but not hear it and you can see it but not see it and your hand can become callous so that it doesn't penetrate and so these people have heard God speaking to them since they were children they've worked away actually the Jewish leaders they literally work away with the word of God and like a man works with his hands and his hands becomes callous so their hearts become hardened and that is a desperate condition but it is common and it is really common in churches like this it's particularly common with those who've been unusually privileged and so these Jews whom Paul is speaking they really are a warning to us aren't they at the end of the book of Acts their ears have scarcely heard their eyes scarcely see they've got spiritual glaucoma they cannot see clearly they're looking but they can't make it out they have eyes but they do not perceive how do you get like that?

[29 : 51] you get it really easily and really simply by not treating the word of God seriously and when you have that kind of detached attitude to it when you sit here Sunday morning and Sunday evening by Sunday morning after Sunday evening and you know what God is asking you to do and you refuse to do it your skin spiritually becomes calloused you'll be ever hearing but never understanding you'll be ever seeing but your eyes will be closed do you notice Paul continues to quote Isaiah doesn't he lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn and I would heal them do you notice there there's a progression isn't it it's not something they were doing at the end of that quote it's something that's being done to them that's the really terrifying thing it's the next stage of the progression you refuse to see and at some point you can't see imagine a man who's a prisoner dealing so realistically with people like this what he's saying is what

Isaiah said that there comes a time when people who've refused to hear and refused to be moved and refused to be touched by God the Holy Spirit there comes a time when they cannot hear and they cannot see and their heart cannot respond think of Pharaoh in Egypt do you remember that phrase that keeps coming up that Pharaoh in Egypt when he's confronted with the living God by Joseph he hardens his heart he hardens his heart against God and he does it frequently and you think what is this man doing keeping hardening his heart but then there comes the time where in the story you don't read that Pharaoh hardened his heart you read that God hardened Pharaoh's heart and look verse 28 Paul applies that to the contemporary Jews and he says this he says therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles and they will listen verse 28 is said by a man who's told us

I've got unceasing anguish and unceasing sorrow I wish that I could be accursed for the sake of my own people I wish that I could be cut off from Christ so that you might believe in the Lord Jesus for the sake of my own brothers for the sake of my own race the people of Israel and then he says to them at the end of Acts I want you to know that God's salvation because you've turned away from it has been sent to the Gentiles and they will listen I have little doubt what Luke wants you and I to

see at the end of Acts he wants us to see this picture of the Jewish people here at this point having lost their opportunity and from now on the gospel goes out to the Gentiles but it's true in IPC this morning not just of the ancient people of Israel that when you refuse the word of God long enough the day comes when the spirit of God says okay and he moves on and so as we close out the book of

Acts you see we've seen the gospel going forward haven't we breaking through barrier after barrier the church growing but we also have this terrifying warning that isn't there a danger you and I who have so much privilege who are so familiar with the word of God that our hearts become calloused and God's word doesn't get through anymore and we can sit through sermon after sermon and we can sing the songs after song but it just bounces off us and we have eyes but we don't perceive and we have ears but we don't hear and the incredible danger of that is that God says okay and suddenly we don't hear God speaking to us anymore and the gospel goes to others who will receive it and hear it history as well as the

Bible makes it abundantly clearly clear that this pattern of God's working is still how he works my prayer is that as we come to the end of Acts we might see that this faithful witness of a man this man that God has used to be a blessing to the ancient world and a blessing to the Gentiles that he might be a blessing to you and me what do the Psalms warn us again and again what were the people of Israel told again and again today if you hear his voice harden not your heart the gospel is unstoppable and the church of Jesus Christ stands and grows forever the gospel will grow the Gentiles will receive it we are caught up in that but what about you today if you hear his voice harden not your heart let's pray

[35 : 37] God Thank you.