

Bible Study Notes: 5-8-24

THE BOOK OF ACTS *Acts 27:1—28:31*

By Dr. James E. Potts

Faithful to the End

In many of the devotional classics, life is described as a journey. Spiritually growth is seen as a pilgrimage in which we mature in the faith. In our journey, we often come up against unexpected events and trying circumstances that severely test our commitment. But faithfulness throughout the entire journey of life is the ultimate mark of a person devoted to Jesus Christ.

As we move now into the last lesson of this adventure-packed book of Acts, we follow closely in Paul's footsteps and observe his faithfulness as Luke takes us toward the end of the journey.

Making it Through the Storm (27:1-44)

Paul had long dreamed of seeing Rome, of taking his witness for Christ to the Eternal City. Luke prepares us for the fulfillment of that dream, ***“And when it was determined that we should sail into Italy, they delivered Paul and certain other prisoners unto one named Julius, a centurion of Augustus’ band” (27:1).***

Three ships and more than 1,000 miles would be involved in this long and hard trip. And early in the journey, Luke writes worryingly the ***“winds were contrary” (27:4).*** This was true throughout much of the trip. As we move ahead now through the events of this twenty-seventh chapter of Acts, we will discover helpful insights that can help us make it through the storms in our lives.

When the ship sailed north from Caesarea, Paul was accompanied by two of his closest friends and was headed for Rome. Luke, the “Beloved Physician” and writer of this story, was with him. And the second friend was Aristarchus, one of Paul's converts in Thessalonica. Both friends were long-time traveling companions of Paul.

Often, God works through Christian friends in support and encouragement during difficult times. When our strength and faith are weak, we can draw on the strength and faith of others. Being a friend and having friends is important in the Christian community. This is believed to be one of the reasons Jesus surrounded Himself with His disciples. And when He sent them out on a special mission, He arranged for them to travel in pairs. We draw strength from each other.

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Within a day or so the ship put into port at Sidon, just a short distance up the coast, and it was here we see that at times friendship can come from unexpected sources. Here Luke gives us a hint of what was, no doubt, the beginning of an unusual relationship when he writes, “*Julius courteously entreated Paul, and gave him liberty to go unto his friends to refresh himself*” (27:3). In other words, Julius treated Paul kindly and allowed him to leave the ship at Sidon and visit with some Christian friends there.

Then, as we moved along through the rest of this journey with Paul, we see a unique and friendly relationship develop between jailor and prisoner. Julius was respectful and courteous to the Apostle, and finally, when he turned Paul over to the authorities in Rome, he arranged for a continuation of that same kind of treatment (28:16). Paul must have had the great gift of being a friend and of receiving the blessings of friendship. As believers, we are to be known by our acts of love. There may well be times when being friendly is our strongest witness of Christ’s presence in our lives.

After leaving Sidon, the ship moved west between the island of Cyprus and the mainland of Asia Minor. It was here that they first encountered trouble “because the winds were contrary.” They made headway against the wind that prevailed at that time of the year and docked at the Lycian port city of Myra. Luke tells us now that Paul and all the prisoners were transferred to a grain ship from Alexandria that was headed for Italy. After leaving Myra, the ship moved on west against the wind for another 200 miles and put in at Cnidus.

Because of the contrary winds, when they left Cnidus, they continued to the port of The Fair Havens, which was near the town of Lasea (27:7-8). And it was here that we see how Paul used good common sense to help him confront another problem or “storm” in his life.

Luke drops a significant statement in the ninth verse when he says, “...the fast was now already past.” This is a reference to the Day of Atonement that was celebrated between late September and early October—in A.D. 59, the year to be traveling on the Mediterranean. Paul knew this from his earlier missionary journeys, and he urged them not to go on against the bad weather conditions and warned that harm could well come to both the ship and passengers (27:9-10). But Paul’s common sense did not prevail against the will of the centurion and the ship’s captain who wanted to sail on west some sixty miles to the harbor at Phenice (Phoenix). They did not take Paul’s advice, but that did not change the rightness of his judgment.

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As the ship was preparing to leave The Fair Havens for their winter port of Phenice, the sailors were encouraged by the presence of a gentle south wind. With this good sign, they cast off, but shortly “...*there arose against it a tempestuous wind, called Euroclydon.*” This wild northeast wind drove them out to sea and threatened to carry them clear across the Mediterranean to the Syris banks, a notorious graveyard for ships, (27:13-26).

The crew and passengers were terrorized by the violence of the storm, and they gave up any hope of being saved (27:30). But now we see a calm Paul draw on the resources of his faith as he confronts this new crisis. And we see him, a prisoner, rise to the place of leadership. In the twelfth verse they had refused his advice, now they accepted it.

The crew had lightened the ship and trimmed the sail, but the ship still drifted on in the storm. In the midst of this seemingly hopeless situation, Paul gave them the good news that came to him from an angel of God who said, “*Fear not, Paul; thou must be brought before Caesar: and, lo, God hath given thee all them that sail with thee. Wherefore, sirs, be of good cheer: for I believe God that it shall be even as it was told me*” (27:23-25). This is the kind of faith that Paul had on that ship in the middle of the storm. And it is this kind of faith that can be ours as we draw on the resources of God in facing the storms in our lives.

Another element of making it through the storm is simplicity—getting rid of anything that is not important and getting down to the basics. The ship’s crew had already started to do that in verses 18 and 19, but they redoubled their efforts as the storm intensified and continued to batter the ship. Now, in 27:27-44 this kind of simplicity is expressed in a further lightening of the ship and in doing those things that are a natural part of life—both were necessary for survival.

After fourteen days in the storm the sailors sensed they were near land because they heard the beating of the surf against the shore. And since it was night, they threw out four sea anchors and waited for daylight (27:27-29). When it got light, the presence of land was obvious, as was the fact that they were in danger of being thrown up on the rocks. Earlier, they had thrown all but the nonessentials overboard. They were stripped down now the essentials.

Luke also tells us that while the crew was getting rid of everything, they could in order to lighten the ship and make it easier to handle, Paul urged them to take care of such natural activities as eating. The storm had been so bad that they had not eaten anything for fourteen days. Paul knew they would need their strength to meet the

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crisis of the next few hours. And as they ate, Paul spoke prophetically, assuring them of their safety (27:33-36).

Two things stand out in this part of the story. First, we are to be faithful in the stewardship of things and time. We are to simplify life and avoid overloading of any kind. And second, we are to be faithful in the stewardship of our bodies. On the ship that morning, Paul was being practical when he urged the crew, and his fellow passengers to get the nourishment they needed for strength. And in facing the storms in our lives, proper stewardship of things and time and health will enable us to become better disciples of the Lord.

Now we move to the climax of this part of the story—the shipwreck itself. By now the crew and passengers had dumped everything possible and had eaten. After daylight they saw a bay and a beach and a creek, so, they cut loose from the anchors, raised the sail, and headed for shore (27:39-40). But part way in they struck a hidden reef, and the ship began to break apart. Everybody was now on their own—some swam while others floated to shore on pieces of the ship, ***“And so it came to pass, that they escaped all safe to land”*** (27:44). This was Paul’s fourth shipwreck.

Miracle at Malta (28:1-10)

Neither Paul nor any of those with him on the ship knew where they were until they were on shore. But in this next part of our lesson (28:1-10) we get some interesting insights into how God can use the unexpected. In their trip from Caesarea to Rome they had not planned to stop at Malta. But this unplanned for and unexpected interruption became, for Paul, one of God’s divine interventions.

Let us pick up on the story of their Malta visit. The wet and cold shipwrecked victims were welcomed by the people of Malta. A fire was built to warm and dry them, but as Paul was adding wood to the fire a snake escaped the heat “and fastened on his hand.” Seeing this, the superstitious islanders assumed Paul was being punished for some wrongdoing. But when he shook the snake off without any aftereffects, they then thought he was a god (28:3-6).

Next, we read about Paul’s introduction to Publius, the head man of the island who entertained Paul and his party for three days. During that time Paul healed Publius’s sick father. And with that, Paul began a three month’s ministry of healing that touched many islanders. But the important thing to understand here is that this unexpected, unplanned stop in Malta was used by God to demonstrate His great power through Paul.

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This reminds us again of just how careful we need to be in our attitude toward interruptions. It is easy to become so involved in the work of the church that we fail to see people and their needs. Reaching out to people in love and friendship can never be an interruption. This seems to be the attitude Paul had during his days in Malta. He looked for and took advantage of the God-moments that occurred even in a place he never expected God to be.

It is interesting to note that in Luke's final comments about the Malta visit he gives us a little twist by writing that the very people who started out being an interruption to the trip ended up by being the ones God used to supply the needs of the shipwrecked travelers. Luke says they *"honored us with many honors; and when we departed, they laded us with such things as were necessary"* (28:10). "Faithfulness to the end" leads us to the place where we can recognize the presence and activity of God in even the unplanned places and events of our lives.

Ministry at Journey's End (28:11-31)

The Rome bound party headed by Julius, the Roman centurion, now boarded their third ship headed north. It is this concluding section of our lesson that we become aware of several parallel features that marked this part of Paul's journey, and which we need to incorporate into ours.

First, it was at Puteoli that Paul found a supportive community. We are not told in Acts just how or when the Christian faith made its way to Italy and to Rome. But for sure, the presence of these Christian brethren was a source of encouragement now to the Apostle.

And then Luke tells us that when they left Puteoli and headed north overland toward Rome, they were met on the Appian Way by a group of Roman Christians who had been made aware of Paul's progress, possibly by friends in Philippi. Reference is made in verse 15 to Three Taverns and the Market of Appius, which was located a little over forty miles southeast of Rome (28:14-15).

Again, Paul was ministered to by Christian friends. No matter where we go or how long we live we never outgrow our need for a supportive community of Christian friends. We are a part of a marvelous worldwide fellowship in which we give and receive strength to and from each other.

In just a few words Luke talks about Paul being delivered to the authorities in Rome. Paul and Julius been through a lot together from Caesarea to Rome. Although Paul was Julius' prisoner, he had been given courteous treatment throughout the trip. It

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would have been impossible for Julius to have spent all that time with his prisoner without being deeply influenced. We catch a hint of this in Luke's description of the prisoner exchange in Rome, ***“And when we came to Rome, the centurion delivered the prisoners to the captain of the guard: but Paul was suffered to dwell by himself with a soldier that kept him” (28:16).*** It would appear from this that while Paul was still a prisoner, he received special concessions. I cannot help but wonder how much a recommendation from Julius had to do with that. Were some strings pulled in Paul's behalf? Could be.

For us Paul is a model of Christian faithfulness. He knew what his mission was, and he stayed with it. For approximately thirty years he had been faithful to his calling. He presented Christ to all who would listen—Jews and gentiles, people of high and low estate. He had plenty of opportunity to be discouraged and even despair. There were times when he may have been tempted to quit and go home, but he never did. His hardships are impossible for us to picture,

“Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once I was stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep; In journeyings often, in perils of water, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness.” So wrote Paul before this last trip of some of his experiences (2 Cor. 11:24-27). Yes, he was ever faithful through the testimony of consistent activity.

Throughout his life of service, Paul's ministry is marked by a consistent strategy, a consistent content, and a consistent purpose. He was always faithful to his calling, regardless of the cost. And he carried this same spirit into his ministry in Rome. We come now to the closing movements of our lesson and our study of the book of Acts. In these last two verses (28:30-31) Luke tells us all we know here of Paul's activity in Rome over a period of two years.

We see in these closing verses a pattern of living that gives us an added understanding of Paul's faithfulness to the Lord—his was a life well lived. His was a life of openness and hospitality. He “received all that came to him.” He was obviously the kind of person others liked to be around. In that, he was much like Jesus. This is friendship evangelism at its best.

These verses also tell us that even though he was a prisoner, Paul lived a life of courage. Our Scripture text says that he carried on his work “with all confidence.” Other

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versions say that he carried on his work boldly. No doubt he continued to face opposition. But the fact that he was able to carry out his ministry with “no man forbidding him” seems to imply that even his opposition had respect for him.

And a third quality of his life that comes through in these verses is that Paul’s actions and message were filled with content. He was busy “preaching the kingdom of God and teaching those things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ.” His hearers were given a vision of an abundant and eternal life, and they were shown the Person who made that kind of living possible. All of this was made real because it came from the experience of Paul’s own life.

The last thing we see about Paul here is that he was a faithful communicator—he preached and taught. And what is equally important, his hearers listened. This means that the content of his message was not only good, but he was skilled in getting it across. By his life and his style, people were willing to listen.

While Luke does not tell us here, Paul was also busy as a communicator in writing during these days in Rome. Elsewhere we learn that it was during this time that he wrote his letters to the Ephesians, the Philippians, and the Colossians. These rich and powerful letters not only spoke to the believers in those days but to the Christians across the world for over 1900 years.

With the completion of these last two verses, Luke stops. He has fulfilled his purpose in writing. In the first lesson Luke gave us what we have come to call the Great Commission—Christians are to witness for Christ in Jerusalem, in Judea, in Samaria, and to all the world. This was the story of Paul’s life. For more than thirty years his witness had been clear. He gave it with friendliness and courage.

The content of his witness was faithful to the claims of Jesus Christ, Savior and Lord. And his witness—his teaching and preaching—skillfully and carefully given. Luke has given us a thrilling drama of the establishing of the Christian Church and its movement out across the world. And he has given us a manual for effective witnessing and discipleship that we can use to our own lives.

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