

THE BOOK OF ACTS

Lesson 56, Chapters 27 and 28

Today we will arrive at the final chapter of the Book of Acts. Although it seems like the entire book has been mostly about Paul, the first half of Acts actually focused mostly on Peter and the Yeshua movement in the Holy Land. When the focus finally does shift to Paul, the location also shifts to the foreign lands of the Roman Empire where well more than 90% of Jews lived in New Testament times.

Before we finish up chapter 27 and then read chapter 28 I want to point out something that probably has become clear to you; it is that while Paul is usually called the Apostle to the Gentiles, that is only so in the broadest sense because from beginning to end of Acts, and in all of Paul's Epistles, he is also ministering to Jews. In fact, whenever he wanders into a new town or city his first stop is at a Jewish synagogue. I think a better and more properly descriptive title for Paul would be the Apostle to the Diaspora as his main dealings were with Jews. And let us always remember that when Paul did go to the Gentiles it was not with the idea of starting a separate religion for the Gentiles (that early on took on the name Christianity), but rather it was an offer for the Gentiles to join with Jews in their covenants with God. Further, when we see Paul take the message to Gentiles we must understand that even though in some ways it is a new work of the Lord, on the other hand it's not as though this sort of thing hadn't been already happening. Jews had been proselytizing Gentiles for centuries, and with some success (we often read about the many God-fearers in the Book of Acts and also hear about some of their personal stories.....god-fearing gentiles such as the Eunuch from Ethiopia and Cornelius the Roman Centurion).

Sadly the message from Acts was distorted by most of the early Church Fathers who were anti-Semitic to one degree or another and so the message was twisted to be one of "the Jews" rejecting Yeshua while the "Gentiles" accepted Him. This is scripturally and historically incorrect. We read of tens of thousands of Jews accepting Yeshua in Jerusalem alone; in fact all of the early "Church" were Jews. Only later do we find Gentiles joining in. And if the standard for claiming that the Jews as a people rejected their Messiah is that not 100% of all Jews accepted Him, then so have the Gentiles rejected Christ because certainly not 100% of gentiles have accepted Him, then or now.

The latest studies of the breakdown of adherents to the various major religions of the world conducted by the Pew Report occurred in 2010. They say that 33% of the world's population is Christians, and that it represents the largest single religion in the 21st century. That's wonderful. But that also means that more than double that number (67%) has not accepted Christ. Since of the 7 billion people on this planet only about 15 million are Jews, then 99.9% of all living people today are Gentiles. And since 7 out of every 10 people alive today reject Christ how can we look in the mirror and say to ourselves, "The Jews reject Christ but the Gentiles accept Him"? And the numbers of those Gentiles who accepted Christ as opposed to those who rejected Him were vastly smaller in the early centuries A.D. So when read honestly and

thoroughly, the Book of Acts refutes some commonly held Christian doctrines that elevate Gentiles and denigrate Jews in God's eyes.

As we pick up our story of the shipwreck, Paul and all the 276 passengers are trapped on board the ship, which is anchored by the stern so that the bow points towards the shore. The storm is still raging and the lifeboat was intentionally scuttled to keep the ship's crew from abandoning ship and leaving the passengers to fend for themselves. So the only way anyone is going to survive is that they will either swim to shore or use some of the debris as life preservers. But any attempt to leave the ship will have to wait until morning, when they can see exactly where they have anchored and how far from land they might be.

READ ACTS CHAPTER 27:31 – end

In verse 33, just before the sun was coming up, **Sha'ul** urged everyone to eat. Clearly even though a few verses earlier Paul had urged the same thing, few must have been able to take in food. It is not as though everyone would have had the same opportunity to eat; each person on a ship was responsible for bringing and preparing his or her own food. No doubt some were too sea sick or nervous to even think about eating. So the ever-practical Paul was merely being pragmatic; whatever lay ahead in the next crucial hour or two was going to take considerable physical exertion and people needed to eat to gain some energy and strength. He reminds them that he knows (from a divine appearance) that everyone will survive, so there is no need to be so anxious from fear that they can't eat. Likely the ship was much more stable at the moment, so some minimal level of food preparation was more doable.

Then we learn that Paul broke bread, said the blessing, and everyone ate. When hearing a sermon or reading a commentary on this passage you can very quickly tell whether the teacher or Pastor has familiarity with Jewish culture, history or Judaism by their conclusions as to what was happening here. Here is an example of what I mean. F.F. Bruce, a classic doctrinalist, in his commentary on this passage says this: ***“There is a cluster of words and phrases here.... “took bread”, “gave thanks”, “broke it”.....which are familiar in a Eucharistic setting. This supports the view of many commentators that the meal here was a Eucharistic meal”***. In other words, F.F. Bruce and many other mainstream gentile New Testament commentators insist that here we have a record of Paul performing Communion. This is an example of someone who has chosen to inject their long held gentile Christian doctrine and personal beliefs over what any of this actually denoted in Jewish society of that day, and to this very day. Jews began most every meal with the **Barakah**, the blessing. The procedure we read here of taking the bread and breaking it, saying a prayer, and then passing it around was normal and customary in most every eating situation for Jews and had absolutely nothing to do with the Church created sacrament of Communion. Most (or at least many) of the passengers on this vessel were probably Jews and if Paul hadn't done this he would have been seen as one who doesn't follow Jewish customs. One of the reasons that the institutional Church WANTS this to be Communion is because Paul has supposedly, by now, given up his Jewish ways and identity and become a Christian (which, by definition, means the worshipper is a gentile). To find Paul leading the ship's passengers in a standard Jewish preamble to a meal (breaking bread and saying a blessing) puts a substantial dent in that claim.

Using a little of the grain that the ship was carrying to eat, what was left (almost all of it) was thrown into the sea to lighten the water-logged ship that was sitting heavy in the water to keep it afloat a little longer (the grain was, by now, ruined by salt water anyway). They didn't know where they were, but they did see a nearby bay with a sandy beach. In a drama made for the big screen, the moment of decision arrived; the captain, using all his skills, would try to head the wounded ship towards the sandy beach and shallower water. They had no further use for the anchors and besides it was a foregone conclusion that the ship itself would not survive so they cut the anchor lines in order to allow the wind and waves to do their job and hopefully push them into shore and safety; but they still needed to be able to steer or the rocks surrounding the bay would surely crack the hull open like an egg. The twin rudders had been lifted up and held securely out of the water during the storm so that they didn't break off. So the ropes holding them up were also cut, allowing the rudders to fall down into the water for the last time in the ship's life. Then, to provide some forward movement for steering, they put up the smaller foresail (a sail at the front of the ship) and aimed towards the beach. They didn't make it. They hit a spot where the waters swirled and tumbled so chaotically that the rudders became useless and there they ran aground on a sandbar some distance from the shore. This means that drowning remained a distinct possibility. Worse, they were still in deep enough waters that the storm waves pounded relentlessly at the flat stern of the hard-grounded ship and were tearing the already battered vessel to pieces; quick action was needed.

At this point it was every man for himself. The ship was virtually disintegrating under their feet; a desperate leap into the swirling and angry water was their only hope. But Julius's soldiers knew that the several prisoners on board would now have the perfect opportunity to escape during the chaos and there would be no way to know for sure whether they had drowned and their corpses floated away, or they had managed to survive and fled. So the soldiers determined to kill all the prisoners. The reason was that it was standard Roman policy that the soldier responsible for allowing a prisoner to escape on his watch would bear the punishment that prisoner would have received if convicted. Most who appealed to Caesar were convicted of capital crimes and hoped to have their cases overturned. But Julius didn't want Paul to be killed, and at the same time couldn't show particular favoritism; so he ordered his troops NOT to kill the prisoners, thus taking the responsibility for any who might escape onto himself. In fact Julius ordered everyone, prisoners included, who could swim to jump in and make their way to shore as best they could, and those who could not swim to jump in and hang onto to the debris of the rapidly disintegrating vessel. And, as the angelic messenger to **Sha'ul** had promised, all 276 souls made it alive to the welcoming beach.

Why did Julius not do the thing that almost any Roman soldier would have done under the circumstances, and kill his prisoners? We have been told all throughout this harrowing sea tale that he had some kind of undefined affinity for Paul. But why would he risk his life for the other prisoners? It can only be that not only was this a decent man who valued life, but the Lord had somehow affected him to be so selfless, even if it was not (so far as we now) an affect that led to his salvation. There is a lesson here; the Lord deals not only with His followers but also with those who oppose Him. We should never think that the Lord is not working in the lives of even His enemies, when the enemy has no idea of it. As we watch the boiling waters of this restless, dying world all around us; waters that we are immersed into just as much as our unbelieving friends are, too, let us always remember that God will use outsiders to bring judgment upon His

own, and also to comfort and even save His own. It is the mystery of God, the mercy of God, and the will of God to do so.

Let's move on to the final chapter of the Book of Acts.

READ ACTS CHAPTER 28 all

Turns out the island they shipwrecked on was Malta. So far as we know, because the term "we" continues to be used, Luke was eyewitness and fellow victim so everything we read is accurate assuming the Greek manuscripts handed down to us are accurate. In reality they weren't as far off course as they had feared; Malta was a regular stop on the Alexandria to Rome route. However the harbor and port was on the opposite side of the island from where they wrecked; so no doubt the captain and ship's owner didn't recognize the island landscape from their current vantage point.

Malta is about 60 miles south of Sicily. Verse 2, in most English Bibles, politely calls the people of the island "natives"; but that is not what the Greek says. Rather the term is **barbaros**, and it more correctly means barbarians. Barbarian was a term that inherently meant people who didn't speak Greek; but it also characterized a people who were less civilized according to Roman standards. It is not unlike the English use of the word "savages" that at one time was used to describe American Indians. That is, the term denotes people who are primitive or beastly in the eyes of those using the term. When we understand that, then we understand why so much attention is paid by Luke as to how kind these barbarians were; unexpectedly kind. The passengers and crew had every right to expect people would show up who might take advantage of their helpless situation. Pirates and those who pillaged shipwrecks infested the Mediterranean at this time.

It was cold (it was early winter, after all) and it was rainy and the physically and emotionally drained castaways sat shivering in the wind. But these "barbarians" immediately came to their aid, and started a fire to warm them. Paul, never one to sit in the background, went out to gather more wood for the fire. There were likely a few fires because there were 276 people to warm. But when Paul was picking up sticks, one of the "sticks" was apparently a snake made inanimate by the cold weather as snakes (that are cold-blooded creatures) are prone to do. As Paul carried the bundle closer to the fire, and the snake's body temperature rose, it awoke and quickly clamped on to Paul's hand and wouldn't let go. The passage says that the snake was a viper, meaning it was poisonous. The superstitious natives saw what happened and essentially just sat back to watch how Paul responded to it. Paul shook off the snake into the fire, and then all waited for Paul to be affected by the venom.

The islanders knew by now that Paul was a prisoner, and so they naturally figured that his being bitten by a snake was justice decided by fate for some crime he had committed. He had somehow escaped the shipwreck unharmed, but now the gods weren't about to let him off the hook for some evil deed he had done so they arranged for him to die by snake bite; however Paul disappointed them. Luke, the doctor, says that there was no reaction whatsoever. Who gets bitten by a poisonous snake and is completely unaffected? Therefore the people waiting for Paul to keel over now decided the opposite; he is not only not being punished by the gods,

he himself must be a god.

I want to briefly comment that it is not unusual at this point for a Bible commentator or perhaps a Pastor to begin to explain the roles of serpents in the Bible, and to start to draw comparisons of this story with the Serpent in the Garden of Eden and with the Fiery Serpent in the Wilderness during the Exodus from Egypt, that looking upon it healed snake bites. I personally find these comparisons to be invalid across the board. About the only theological message that I can see in our story concerning the snake is that Paul was supernaturally protected by God and that God can heal or even prevent injury as He wills it. Luke recorded an incident that was quite real, and no doubt he was fascinated by the result even if he had no explanation as to why things went the way they did. My simple view is that Paul still had not arrived to Rome, the destination God had in mind for him. It was not yet Paul's time to die; so he didn't.

Malta was around 120 square miles in size and therefore had sufficient land to house some estates. A fellow named Publius owned one of those estates and was the governor of the island; his land was not far from the shipwreck. When he heard of the disaster he graciously offered hospitality to the victims. Luke makes it clear that Publius treated everyone in a friendly fashion and put them up for 3 days. However his father was ill and was in bed with a severe gastric ailment and dysentery; he also had a fever, which means he had an infection. These sorts of ailments rarely sorted themselves out in ancient times, rather usually ending in a painful death. Paul heard of it and went to Publius's father, laid hands on him, and he was healed. Word spread rapidly and the island people came in droves to have their ailments healed.

At this time in history generally all people saw illness in a spiritual context. They thought that demon possession caused illness; they also thought that gods routinely laid diseases on people to punish them. Think for a moment about what we learned from Leviticus concerning the skin disease called **Tzara'at** (most English Bibles erroneously call it Leprosy). **Tzara'at** was not a specific skin disease, but rather manifested itself in a number of ways. In modern medical terms we read of a range of serious skin diseases, but the Bible uses the term **Tzara'at** for them all. The important point is that the Scriptures confirm that **Tzara'at** is caused spiritually, supernaturally, by God. It is usually in response to an unclean soul. So it isn't like folks in Bible times (Jews or pagans) were entirely wrong about the source of all disease. Even doctors like Luke saw it that way; however they had training in certain potions and medications that could sooth and reduce pain and discomfort. Doctors also were expert at treating wounds, something that wasn't usually connected to the spiritual world. The concept of germs and bacteria causing disease was centuries away and so with no other explanation at hand for illnesses that usually appeared from nowhere, only the spiritual was left. Thus holy men were often seen as physicians, and usually healing involved prayer. It was also common to for these holy men to lay hands on a patient and that is what we see Paul doing here. Holy men didn't grow on trees; and verifiable miraculous healings were even rarer. So it's no wonder that when Publius's father quickly recovered from what was usually fatal, word spread like wildfire. Luke simply says this about that: "and they were healed". Paul spent his time healing by the power of the Lord; and the so-called barbarians were so grateful that when the time came for Paul and his fellow passengers to sail away, they gave them all the needed supplies.

Verse 11 explains that after 3 months on the island the shipwrecked group boarded an Alexandrian ship and set sail. It's hard to pinpoint exactly when this was, but likely it was around February because that's when the west winds begin to blow. This Alexandrian ship would have wintered in harbor on Malta. The ship was called "Twin Gods", or in other English versions merely "Twins". What this is referring to is the ship's figurehead that was customary on the bow of large sailing vessels. They were the twin sons of the God Zeus, called Castor and Pollux. These twin gods were believed to be the gods of navigation and safe travel, and their Constellation was Gemini.

The ship's destination was Syracuse, which lay on the southeast coast of Sicily. It was a relatively short sail of 60 miles (about a day) and we're told they stayed in port there for 3 days, likely to onload and offload cargo. Luke continues with his detailed itinerary by telling us that from Syracuse they went to Rhegium, but they had to tack (sort of zigzag) to get there, meaning it took a little longer. They were essentially island hopping and so they picked up a nice southerly wind and they sailed on to Puteoli. Puteoli is located on the northern shore of the Bay of Naples. This was a major port because it was on the mainland of Italy. Now the ships' cargo (often grain) could be carried overland in wagons and distributed to towns and villages. Paul's time on a ship was finally over. He had been traveling now for at least 4 months.

Puteoli had a substantial Jewish colony so it is not surprising that there we'd also find Believing Jews. However we need to notice how far and wide trust in Yeshua had already spread, and it was certainly not Paul that had spread it to Italy. Many other evangelists were at work and doing God's will of spreading the Gospel of Yeshua; we just never read about them in the Bible or know who they were. When Paul met the Believers they offered to keep him for a week. I must say that as nice as all this sounds, one cannot help but wonder how Paul, a prisoner, was able to find other Believers and even decide to stay with them. Probably it was Luke and his other traveling companions who actually did the scouting and found the Believers. There is no chance that Paul was free enough to not be supervised by a Roman soldier. But likely it was only one soldier because a trust had been built. Nonetheless the Believers had to have accepted the Roman soldier to accompany Paul, and very likely the soldier was chained to him most of the time. But let's be clear; in the Roman Empire soldiers could be billeted where ever the military felt it expedient to put them; and many times it was in people's homes. So folks, including Jews, were used to having Roman soldiers in their midst, even staying in their residences. It seems that the farther away from the Holy Land a Jew resided, the more tolerant they were of the gentile ways; and that gentiles were more at ease with the Jews. Notice also that it was not just Paul who was invited to stay with the Brethren; verse 15 clearly says "us". So Luke and others traveling with Paul (and at least one Roman soldier) all went to stay with the local Believers.

Just a few miles from Puteoli was the Appian Way, one of the marvelous Roman roadways that helped to interconnect Italy. It was the Appian Way that the group traveled upon to get to Rome. This was not a superhighway, however, nor was it one of the better Roman highways. It was described as being "rough and flinty and making significant demands upon travelers". With little fanfare, Paul arrives in Rome. There he was allowed to rent a place to stay by himself, but with his personal Roman guard as a housemate of course. No doubt this decision

to allow Paul this privilege was made by the local judicial authority, and the decision seems to indicate a belief that Paul's case will likely be dismissed and that Paul is no threat to flee. Julius's commission to bring Paul (and presumably other prisoners as well) to Rome was completed and so we hear no more of him. However, interestingly, this is also the end of the "we" passages. So it seems that Luke is no longer accompanying Paul from here forward.

Only 3 days after establishing himself in his flat in Rome, Paul begins to contact the local Jewish leadership of what was a substantial Jewish community in Rome. These would have been mostly traditional Jews, not Messianics. Historians estimate that at this time there was a Jewish community of between 40,000 and 50,000 in Rome. I think it is interesting and valuable for serious Bible students to get a good picture of the Jewish community of Rome in New Testament times. Too much we assume that the Romans were vicious, hated the Jews, and the Jews lived under terrible Roman persecution and so forth. The evidence, Biblical and otherwise, says the opposite. We need to take this reality into account when we think about the Book of Revelation and its several references to Rome. So indulge me, please, as I read to you a long excerpt from Philo, the noted Jewish philosopher and historian, about his firsthand perception of the Jewish Community of Rome.

"How then did Augustus (Caesar) show his approval? He was aware that the great section of Rome on the other side of the Tiber (River) is occupied and inhabited by Jews, most of whom were Roman citizens emancipated. For having been brought as captives to Italy they were liberated by their owners and were not forced to violate any of their native institutions. He knew therefore that they have houses of prayer and meet together in them, particularly on the sacred Sabbaths when they receive as a body training in their ancestral philosophy. He knew too that they collect money for sacred purposes from their firstfruits and send them to Jerusalem by persons who would offer the sacrifices. Yet nevertheless he neither ejected them from Rome nor deprived them of their Roman citizenship because they were careful to preserve their Jewish citizenship also, nor took any violent measures against the houses of prayer, nor prevented them from meeting to receive instruction in their laws, nor opposed their offerings of firstfruits. Indeed so religiously did he respect our interests that was supported by well-nigh his whole household he adorned our temple through the costliness of his dedications, and ordered that for all time continuous sacrifices of whole burnt offerings should be carried out every day at his own expense as a tribute to the Most High God. Yet more, in the monthly doles in his own city when all the people each in turn receive money or corn, he never put the Jews at a disadvantage in sharing the bounty, but even if the distributions happened to come during the sabbath when one is not permitted to receive or give anything, or transact any part of the business of ordinary life, particularly of a lucrative kind, he ordered the dispensers to reserve for the Jews till the morrow the charity which fell to all. Therefore everyone, everywhere, even if he was not naturally well disposed to the Jews, was afraid to engage in destroying any of our institutions, and indeed it was the same under Tiberius."

Doesn't sound very much like persecution, does it? The reality is that the Romans valued peace. They knew that they had to be tolerant and careful and for whatever reason they were especially careful with the Jews not to violate their religion or place demands upon them that

caused them to feel shamed. This was far more than a friendly attitude; it was Roman law.

The Jewish community exerted substantial influence on the Roman government. It is interesting that this seems to have been something that God did for Israel even when they were in exile. Recall the favor that Nebuchadnezzar showed to Jews by including many in his government, including the Prophet Daniel. And then the great and special favor that Cyrus the Persian showed to Israel when he freed them from Babylon, even helping to pay to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. History reveals that there were many synagogues in Rome (at least dozen are known by name) and by government edict they were to be left undisturbed, even protected. Since the Messianic community (Believers) was at this time still seen as merely one of the several sects of Judaism, they too enjoyed the favor of Roman government.

So with this understanding of the excellent relationship that the Roman Jews enjoyed with the Roman government, we see why Paul felt it necessary to reassure the local Jewish leaders that he was no rebel, and that he was not here to disturb the peace. And that despite the reality that it was a certain group of Judeans who had him arrested and has put him through this ordeal that has been going for almost 3 years, he is not in Rome to bring accusations against his own nation (his own people).

No doubt the Jewish residents of Rome knew about the constant uprisings in Judea; and they did not want to be associated with it and did not want to be counted as part of that group, even though they were fellow Jews. It is also clear from Philo that the Roman Emperors were enlightened enough to make distinctions between the trouble-making Jews of Jerusalem, and the rest of the Jews in their Empire who generally just wanted to go-along-to-get-along. Paul wanted to immediately set these Jewish leaders of Rome at ease that in no way was he part of that rebellious, trouble-making group.

It is interesting how the Jewish community has, over the years, sort of divided itself into the group of the zealous who will allow no interference in their Judaism, at any cost; and a different group who desires to work with their gentile neighbors and authorities to craft a compromise in order to live and co-exist in peace. Today we find such a similar situation between the Jews of the Holy Land, Israel, versus the Jews of the ongoing Diaspora. Most Jews in Israel today are ready to stand, fight, and defend their nation against aggressors, and they brook little outside interference on their internal affairs. Yet the bulk of European and American Jews are like the Jews of Rome; they are mainly concerned with peace where they live and are willing to compromise with the gentile world to attain it. Most Jews of modern Israel will lay down their lives before giving up land for peace. Most Jews of Europe and America think land for peace is not only a good idea, but is reasonable, and they find no common ground with the militant mindset of the modern Jewish Zealots of the Holy Land. Rather, USA and European Jews typically do not want to be associated with Israeli Jews or identified as one of them. And no doubt it is because the Jews of the modern Diaspora want to live in peace and quiet wherever they choose to call home.

Which side is right? Which side is taking the Godly view?

We'll finish up the Book of Acts next time.