

Acts 28

Before I get started I want to thank all of the lecturers for their teachings this year. A lot of work goes into preparing these presentations, and I hope you're in agreement with me that we've been abundantly blessed by their efforts and insights. I especially want to acknowledge Laurel for doing such an amazing job of fitting 2,000 years of church history in two 30-minute lectures – simply wonderful. Every lecturer has “upped their game” this year, and we are all the better for it. I wish you all a restful Summer break – you've earned it!

Well, here we are. Can you believe we're at the end of another year of Bible study? I'm going to spend the first part of the lecture on chapter 28 and then attempt, with the remaining time, to summarize the key points of the book of Acts. We pick up our story from last week – Paul and 275 other people on what *once was a ship* are holding on to *what's left of the ship* and are in the water headed for the island of Malta. A Roman centurion is assisting Paul and the others to escape from a plan by the soldiers on the ship to kill the prisoners before they could swim away and escape. Chapter 27 concludes that, just as Paul had prophesied, all of the passengers would get to land safely. Interestingly, this area where it is believed they came ashore is known today as Saint Paul's Bay.

Malta is in the Mediterranean Sea – it is just south of Italy. As the crow flies, it is over 400 miles to Rome – Paul's ultimate destination. The chapter begins with the confirmation that the centurion-led group has successfully escaped from the soldiers on the ship. They met up with the local people,

and the people treated them kindly – building a fire to help them keep warm from the cold and rain.

We then get another glimpse into the character of Paul. They’ve just been through a huge ordeal with the shipwreck, but where do we find him? He’s out collecting wood for the fire. He could have just sat there and expect others to do the menial work or be served, but he humbled himself and chipped in to help keep the fire going. Paul was a “doer” – he didn’t sit around and wait for others to take action. There’s a saying that churches are full of willing people – some are willing to work, and others are willing to let them.

What does he get for his humble and good work ethic? A viper latching onto his hand. How many of you saw any of the Indiana Jones movies? I’m right there with Indiana Jones on this one – I hate snakes. But just like everything else in the Bible where something strikes fear in us, we need to turn to God and see He’s bigger than what we’re afraid of – AND – He can use it as a way to teach us more about His protective love for us.

Jesus said in Mark 16:17-18, “And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well.” Some sectors of the church today believe these signs Jesus is speaking of were only for the early church – they were to be used to provide substance to the message of the Gospel. Whether or not

you support this position, we need to be mindful that if we're seeking such signs – are we doing them to draw attention to God or to ourselves.

If you can believe this, there are estimated to be 125 churches today in the UNITED STATES that use poisonous snakes during church services. Just 3 months ago a pastor in Kentucky died after being bitten by a rattlesnake during a weekend church service. After being bitten, he refused medical treatment – as did his wife when the ambulance arrived when it got out he had been bitten. It is not for us to test God to prove his power – we need to remember what Jesus said to Satan after he tempted Jesus the second time – Jesus, quoting Deuteronomy 6:16, “It is written, You shall not tempt the Lord your God.” One final comment on this notion of snake handling – Paul did not deliberately pick up the viper that bit him – it is possible that this was another piece of evidence that Paul's thorn in the flesh was poor eyesight – he just didn't see the viper on the sticks he was picking up.

The reaction from the islanders is pretty weird – since he was bitten, he must have been a murderer, so this is the goddess of justice in action (known today as Karma). You wouldn't believe how many people questioned Vickie's and my walk with God during her prolonged illness. We're far from perfect, but the concept of bad things happening in life occurring solely because we've done something wrong is a lie from the bowels of hell to those of us who are in Christ Jesus. This isn't to say that there aren't consequences to sinful behavior, but the notion that God is punishing us because of our sin is legalistic garbage. Jesus took the punishment for our sin – past, present, and future. God does not punish those who call on His Son's name.

Paul didn't buy their accusations either. He was so close with God in his relationship with Him – he was so certain of the depth and power of God's love for him, it allowed him to simply shake off the viper into the fire. There's not even a hint of fear or concern from Paul in this story. I can assure you there would be if **I** had a viper hanging from my hand. I'd be screaming and yelling making an absolute fool of myself – probably making for a potential viral video on “You Tube” if it were caught on film.

How could Paul act so calmly in this situation? He had been depositing the truths of God's unending love, His promises of protection and provision, and His unparalleled goodness into his heart and mind for years. He had transformed his mind by truly abiding in Christ. Paul was so at peace with the oneness he had with Jesus that it's as if the viper didn't latch onto Paul's hand, but it latched onto Jesus' hand. Do you want that kind of oneness with God? I do. I believe that each one of us who call Jesus as our Savior have the potential to achieve just such a closeness with Jesus. He didn't die just to save us from our sin, He rose so we could have new life **with Him**.

We see the fickleness of human nature as the same islanders who were calling Paul a murderer are now, after seeing the viper's bite had no impact on him, are calling him a god. We see no evidence of Paul accepting or receiving this kind of praise, but he would go on to demonstrate the power of the true and living God by healing the father of the chief official of the island and then others on the island who were sick.

After three months in Malta, Paul and his team catch a ship from Alexandria with the figurehead of Castor and Pollux – twin sons of Zeus, the gods of navigation. They work their way through Syracuse, Rhegium, and then to

Puteoli – about 125 miles from Rome. Some of the brothers in Rome heard of Paul’s coming and went as far as 33 and even 43 miles to meet with him and join him on his way to his destination.

Paul arrives in Rome and, though a prisoner, he was allowed to live in his own rented house – with guards changed every 6 hours - and allowed to receive visitors. Notably, in Philippians 4:22, Paul said to the Philippian believers, “All God’s people here send you greetings, especially those who belong to Caesar’s household.” How did those in Caesar’s household get saved? By being chained to Paul – no doubt by him sharing the gospel to all who were assigned to him.

Paul then requests to meet with the local Jewish leaders. He begins with statements that should sound familiar, “My brothers, although I have done nothing against our people or against the customs of our ancestors, I was arrested in Jerusalem and handed over to the Romans. They examined me and wanted to release me, because I was not guilty of any crime deserving death.” Do you see the similarities here first with Jesus and then with Stephen? No sin has been committed - no disrespect to the customs – yet they’re arrested. Even when arrested, the examination of the terms of the arrest reveals no guilt – he is falsely accused.

Let me ask you something, do you think you’re guilty of something in the eyes of God? I think we all need a regular refresher on this issue. Let’s take a look at a couple of verses. Ephesians 1:7 says, “*In Him* we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace.” The italics on “*In Him*” are from me for the purpose of emphasizing the next verse which is Ephesians 1:4, “For he chose us *in Him*

before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight.” What are these verses telling us? When we confess Jesus as our Savior and Lord – by His grace, we are *in Him*. We have been redeemed by His shed blood on the cross, and our sins – all of our sins – past, present, and future – are completely and totally forgiven. As a result, we are holy and blameless in God’s sight. We are **NOT GUILTY!**

As if that were not enough, 2 Corinthians 5:17 tells us once we are *in Him* – or *in Christ* - we become a new creation – we have a new identity. That identity is holy and blameless in God’s eyes. Paul exhorted us in Philippians 2:12 that we’re to work out our salvation in fear and trembling. This doesn’t mean our works get us our salvation – that’s by His grace. We’re to work out – meaning exercise, train, or discipline our new identity soberly and thoughtfully under the loving guidance of God. This is ***important*** folks – as we do this, we are going to make mistakes – even sin – from time to time. Does this change our status before God? NO!! If you think you’re guilty in God’s eyes, that’s the enemy falsely accusing you – like we just heard from Paul and we saw in Jesus and Stephen. As we work out our salvation, we are doing this from a position of strength in forgiveness as opposed to the lies of the weakness in condemnation. Don’t listen to the enemy – listen to God, and He says you are holy and blameless in His sight – now and forever. Amen?

Interestingly, the Jews in Rome don’t have a beef with Paul – they’ve heard about the challenges to the sect – the Gospel, but they haven’t heard about his prominent role in the spreading of the Gospel. A few days later, a greater number of people would come to visit Paul, and he would give an accounting of the Kingdom of God, the Law of Moses, and the prophets – all

in attempt to persuade them about Jesus. In verse 24, we see a telling statement, “Some were convinced by what he said, but others would not believe.”

The same is true today – some believe, some don’t. We need to clearly understand our role in the salvation process for those to whom we witness. 1 Corinthians 3:7 tells us, “So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase.” Our “job” in spreading the Gospel is to communicate the truth of who Jesus is and what He’s done for our lives. It is NOT our job to bring them to salvation. That is God’s job – that’s what Paul means in this verse – we’re to plant the seed of the Gospel by telling them about Jesus, and we water the seed by telling them about what He’s done for us in our lives and loving them. But that’s where our responsibility stops. It is God who gives the increase. Once we’ve done our job, it is up to the person to whom we’re witnessing to choose salvation – under the influence of the Holy Spirit – He’ll give the increase. It is said that it’s pretty hard for the Lord to guide a man if he hasn’t made up his mind which way he wants to go. Hopefully, that should take some pressure off of us in our witnessing efforts.

Paul would touch the nerves of those who didn’t believe and cause them to leave after he said in verses 25-28, ²⁵ “The Holy Spirit spoke the truth to your ancestors when he said through Isaiah the prophet: ²⁶ “Go to this people and say, “You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.”²⁷ For this people’s heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.’ ²⁸ “Therefore I want you

to know that God's salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen!"

In verses 26-27, Paul is quoting Isaiah – pointing out their calloused hearts are nothing new in Jewish history. That's a tough message to send. Do you think he said this in anger or judgment? I don't believe so. Paul made it clear in the 9th chapter of Romans how he felt about his fellow Jews, "I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. ³ For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my people, those of my own race, ⁴ the people of Israel. Theirs is the adoption to sonship; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. ⁵ Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of the Messiah, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen."

I'm convinced the tough message Paul sent to those unbelieving Jews in verses 25-28 was done in love. Sometimes we have to deliver tough messages to those we love – but we're always to do it in love – not with a legalistic and condemning spirit. This is what true Christian friendship is – telling the truth, but telling it in love and compassion.

The chapter ends telling us Paul would stay in Rome for 2 years preaching the Gospel. As for the remainder of Paul's story, while in Rome, he would write the letters to the Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. According to *Halley's Bible Handbook*, it is generally accepted that Paul was acquitted in about A.D. 61 or 62 - probably by Nero – whom it is believed Paul made an impassioned presentation of the Gospel. In the book of Romans, he mentioned his plans to go to Spain, so it is possible that he made a fourth missionary journey to Spain, Greece, and Asia Minor in about

A.D. 63 to 67 during which he would have written the letters to Timothy and Titus. He was then arrested again, taken back to Rome by Nero – whom after rejecting Paul’s presentation of the Gospel became one of the most evil men in history and a terrible persecutor of Christians. He would order the beheading of Paul around A.D. 67.

With the time I have left, I want to do a quick summary of what we’ve covered in the book of Acts. Let’s begin with a few of the key verses.

Key Verses:

- Jesus said in **1:8**: But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.
- Peter said in **4:12**: Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.
- Jesus said in **10:15**: What God has cleansed you must not call common
- Paul said in **20:24**: But none of these things move me; nor do I count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.

Next, let’s mention the key players:

Key Players:

- Holy Spirit
- Peter
- Stephen
- Paul
- Barnabas/John Mark/Silas/Luke
- Gentiles
- Persecutors

Finally, let’s briefly cover the key issues:

Key Issues:

- Power of the Holy Spirit
- Testimonies of Israel's true history and conversions
- Miracles
- Grace vs. Legalism
- Persecution
- Fulfilled promises

So we have the key verses, the key players, and the key issues. They're all critical components of the success of the early church. However, the foundation to which all of these rest is Jesus Christ – the Son of God and co-equal member of the triune Godhead. The same is true today – whatever is going on in your life – be it good or bad, sickness or health, wealth or poverty – God is at the center of everything in your life. For those times when things are going well, be thankful and draw closer to God. For the heartbreaking times, the notion that God is in control can be a hard pill to swallow when you're in pain, and you're not seeing relief or deliverance. You may be asking where is God in this mess? I can assure you He is there – He is looking for you to turn to Him in your pain and suffering – your weakness. Your weakness is valuable to Him – it's nothing to be ashamed of. It is the doorway to letting Him into your heart, mind, body, and soul and commence taking you to a new level in your relationship with Him – letting Him show you what your true identity is – in Him.

This leads me to my conclusion. Have you ever been reading a verse – especially one you've read several times and then suddenly one day – it's like the Lord flashes a big spotlight on it saying, "Pay attention to this Word – I said it especially for you." These are what are known as inheritance verses. For those of us who have confessed our faith in Jesus Christ, we

become adopted children of His, therefore, we become heirs of incredible blessings. We have a great inheritance - Colossians 3:24 tells us, “knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ.” Part of that inheritance is the promises of Scripture – meant for each of us who are heirs.

I want to share one of my inheritance verses with you – actually it’s a segment of a verse. Most of you know the story – Jesus has been crucified and has been resurrected. Two believers are on the road to Emmaus, and they’re bummed out about the fact that Jesus has been killed – they don’t yet know He has risen and is alive. Who should show up on the road with them? None other than Jesus Himself. He asks them ‘What’s up?’, but they don’t recognize Him. They respond to Him as if He has no idea what’s going on and proceed to tell *their* version of what they think is going on. When they’re done with their story, Jesus tells them His story – beginning with Moses and the Prophets. How I would have loved to hear that sermon!

We pick up the story in Luke 24:28, “Then they drew near to the village where they were going, and He indicated that He would have gone farther.” And here’s the segment of the verse that the Lord shed His Shekinah glory on for me, “*He indicated that He would have gone farther*”. I went, ‘Whoa’. The Lord wants to go farther with *me*!

What are you saying, Dan? What do you mean? Here’s the thing – Jesus is telling me – He’s telling you, “I’m so happy that you received my gift of salvation. I love you so much, and I’m so proud of you. You are precious to

me, but I want to go farther with you. I want to take you on a journey – to places you’ve never known before – places you’ve never imagined.”

What do you think is implied in this statement that He would have gone farther? Not only is He telling us He wants us to go farther, but also He is telling us *He is going to be there with us as we go further – He’s not going to leave us alone!* This verse was very helpful to me as my family was going through the long trial we just experienced. It brought hope and purpose to what was going on. Prior to entering the trial, the Lord put on our hearts that we didn’t want to be part-time Christians – living only part of our lives for Jesus – not fully committed to Christ. We prayed for this, and boy did He hear that prayer! And here’s why – we became in *alignment* with what this inheritance verse says - in essence, this prayer was telling God we wanted to go farther with Him. When He heard that request, He said, “Awesome! We’re in agreement with each other – I want to go farther with you. Now let’s get going!”

So you may be thinking that’s great for you, Dan, but what does this have to with me? Hang in there – I’m just about done. How many of you remember being in school, and it is the last day of school before vacation starts? It’s the end of the day – you’re mind is already checking out and thinking of all the fun you’re going to have. Suddenly, the teacher says those dreaded words, “I have an assignment for you during the break.” What??? Are you kidding me? Do you not understand the meaning of ‘vacation’? I hated those!!!

Well, now being in the role of a teacher, it’s payback time. I’ve heard many of you say you’re ready for a break – ready for a vacation. Many of you are

taking breaks or vacations this Summer – that’s great, I hope you have a great time. Now, here’s your two-fold assignment – it is totally voluntary. First, that you don’t take a break or vacation *from* Jesus. That isn’t a vacation, it’s a recipe for backsliding. The second phase of the assignment is that you take a break or vacation *with* Jesus. Here’s one thing about the assignment I never got from a teacher – I’m willing to help you with your second assignment.

Getting back to the concept of inheritance verses – verses that God has given you that are personal promises of His love, care, protection, provision, deliverance, or character – I’m asking that you spend some time on these verses this Summer. ‘Dan, what do you mean?’ I’m asking you to pick out a verse or verses that have special meaning to you – verses that the Lord has put on your heart that are important. I want you to write it out and just read it several times a day – think about it, meditate on it – ask the Lord, “What are You telling me about Yourself?” or “What are You telling me about what You think of me?” I’m not asking you that you memorize the verse. Although, I believe if you truly spend enough time on the verse, you’ll find yourself memorizing it naturally. God will sear it into your heart and mind.

Now some of you may not have any verses like this – You haven’t heard the Lord say to you, “This promise is for you because I love you – I can’t lie – I keep my promises.” That’s ok – no big deal. This is where I’m offering my assistance. On each of the tables is a stapled list of verses - one for every day we have off until we meet again in the fall. It’s totally ok if the verse for that day doesn’t strike you – it’s completely up to God to decide what verses are

meant for you from Him. I'm just offering verses to you that are related to His promises and His character.

Finally, you don't have to use these verses – I encourage you to seek them out for yourself. No pressure – just pick out one verse – maybe you need to spend more than one day on a verse – that's totally cool. God loves you where you are, but He wants to go further with you – he wants to take you on an incredible journey that He's designed specifically for you. You don't have to be afraid to trust an unknown future to a known God – especially since He's going to be with you every step of the way. The only way you're going to know what journey He has for you is if you spend time with Him – getting to know Him through His Word and finding out how much He loves you and how excited He is that you're choosing to spend time with Him – even take a vacation with Him. I promise where He's going to take you is going to be amazing.

Let's pray.