

The Book of Acts Study Guide

Chapters 27-28

27:1-44

At the conclusion of the hearing with Festus and Agrippa, Paul's journey to Rome finally began. He was placed in the custody of a centurion and he was accompanied on the journey by two other believers. One was Aristarchus, a Gentile believer from Thessalonica. He had accompanied Paul to Ephesus during the last missionary journey (19:29) and then traveled with Paul to Jerusalem (20:4). Later, in Colossians 4:10 Paul states that Aristarchus sends his personal greetings and Paul calls him "my fellow prisoner." Since the book of Colossians was most likely written by Paul from Rome, this indicates that Aristarchus stayed with Paul all the way to Rome and continued to stay with him after he was confined there. Paul's other companion on this journey from Caesarea to Rome was Luke because the writer of Acts uses the terms "we" and "us" continually throughout the story.

Their route took them north along the coast to Sidon, then west across the Mediterranean Sea, using Cyprus to block out some of the strong winds in their face, and then they went west along the coast of Asia.

v. 6 – They changed ships in the city of Myra. This vessel was carrying grain from Alexandria, Egypt to Rome.

vv. 7-8 – This time they sailed along the southern coast of Crete until they reached a place near the mid-point of the island's coast called Fair Havens.

v. 9 – They stayed there for some time, and we are given an indicator of the lateness of the season, because we are told, "the fast was already over." That is a reference to Yom Kippur. Luke mentioned that detail because Paul was Torah-observant and the same may have been true for Luke, or at least he was accepting of the validity of the feasts for those who kept them.

Yom Kippur takes place in late September or early October. That means they had reached the time of year when the weather on the sea made it difficult to sail in a westerly direction, and soon, by the month of November, most ships stopped sailing until the next spring, usually around the month of March. So that put the captain and crew and passengers into a dispute regarding what to do next.

v. 10 – Paul was qualified to recommend that they remain in the current harbor for the rest of the winter because he was an experienced traveler in the region. That indicates that believers should be able to use their skills of discernment in areas besides those that are spiritual in nature.

vv. 11-12 – But the captain of the ship wanted to seek another harbor called Phoenix and Paul's advice was ignored.

vv. 13-16 – When a moderate wind from the south came up, they set sail because that would easily allow them to travel westward on what is called a "reach" (perpendicular to the wind). But the wind changed directions and began blowing strongly from the northeast, driving the boat away from the island of Crete. They came to a small island south of Crete called Claudia (modern Gandos) and used the island to shield the boat from the wind.

vv. 17-20 – The concern was that they would be driven all the way across the Mediterranean Sea to

the shallows of Syrtis, which were sandbars off the coast of Libya in North Africa that had become an extensive graveyard for ships. Once you bottomed-out there, you would die there, typically from lack of water to drink. So that was a very fearful thing for the crew of the ship. That set off a series of maneuvers intended to prevent getting stranded. First they attached cables under the hull to support the ship. Then, in order to slow the ship, they let the anchor drag behind them in the water. After that, they began tossing the cargo overboard, followed by the ship's tackle. But nothing worked as the great storm continued unabated. The assumption was that they would all die.

- vv. 21-26 – At that point, Paul exhorted everyone by saying that he had received a message from an angel that the ship would be lost, but everyone would survive. He said they would run aground on a certain island, but that must have seemed impossible since they assumed they would instead be stranded on the deadly sandbars of Systis.
- v. 27 – Instead, they were blown west into the Adriatic Sea between Greece and Italy. At this point the storm had continued for fourteen days and they had been driven 475 miles to what they later learned to be the island of Malta.
- vv. 28-30 – Sensing that land was approaching in the darkness, the sailors decided to abandon the ship by getting into the lifeboat and stranding the passengers onboard, who would not be able to survive hitting the rocks.
- vv. 31-32 – So Paul convinced the centurion to take action, who then had his soldiers cut the ropes to the lifeboat, causing it to drift away empty before the sailors could get onboard.
- vv. 33-38 – Paul then did two things – one practical and one spiritual, but both serve as a testimony. How does encouraging the passengers and crew to eat bread serve as a testimony? It shows that believers can be clear-thinking people and can assess a problem and come up with a solution. His prayer of thanksgiving was a testimony because he was not afraid to praise the name of the Lord (*Adonai/Kurios*) in the presence of non-believers. That demonstrated having confidence and conviction about what he believed.

Notice also that Luke describes Paul's actions as "breaking bread." This episode disproves the claim that "breaking bread" refers to communion. That is important because those same claimants say that the use of "breaking bread" on the first day of the week in 20:7 shows that the early believing community changed the day of worship and rest to the first day of the week.
- vv. 39-44 – Then the sailors attempted to beach the ship on a sandy part of the island. But before that could happen, they hit a reef and the ship was stuck and doomed. The centurion had to stop his soldiers from killing the passengers, including Paul. Instead, everyone had to swim or use debris from the shipwreck to float ashore.

28:1-15

- vv. 1-2 – Once ashore, the passengers and crew were given care by a group of people who lived on the island. Luke calls them *barbaroi*, translated as "natives," but more literally "barbarians." The word does not imply they were savages. It is an onomatopoeia based on the fact that the people on Malta did not speak Greek and the words of their language sounded like "bar, bar, bar" to Greek-speakers.
- vv. 3-4 – When Paul was bitten by a snake (apparently a poisonous species), the natives expected

him to die. They also interpreted this incident as a form of divine justice and concluded that he must be a murderer. That way of thinking is rooted in the Greek and Roman worldview, especially regarding mythology. The Greek word translated in verse 4 as “justice (KJV “vengeance”) is *dike*. The word can be used to describe a judicial verdict. And it can also be used in reference to the Greek goddess *Dike* who was said to administer divine justice. The Greeks believed that Dike was the daughter of Zeus and she had the responsibility of punishing all wrong and rewarding virtue. So she was depicted as a young woman carrying a scale, representing her ability to make a determination of right and wrong, and then causing that verdict to be carried out respectively in the lives of humans. In many ways, the Greek way of thinking was similar to the Hindu concept of *karma*, in which deity makes sure that people get what they deserve in life.

The question, then, is—what was being conveyed by the natives? Were they specifically referring to the goddess Dike or the concept of justice? Which one was not allowing Paul to live? Based on the context of this verse, it is a reference to the goddess because the word *dike* is being used in an active sense—she is not allowing him to live. If it was a judicial verdict, it would be a passive result, meaning that Paul or anyone else would receive justice or it would be carried out on him. And you have to take into account the Greek way of thinking in which the gods are considered to be the ultimate cause of the circumstances of life. This is different than the Buddhist understanding of karma, or the pop-culture version of it, that says bad things inevitably happen to bad people, perhaps due to an impersonal force in the universe but not caused by a god.

This raises the general issue of justice in this world. Some people say that a negative occurrence in life or for a nation is the consequence of divine justice. The problem with that kind of thinking is that it is very simplistic and does not take into account the complex ways that God operates in this world, in which pure justice is tempered by other attributes of God, like grace and mercy and glory. Clearly there are natural consequences for sinful actions. But sometimes negative things happen to people without any prior sin taking place. This is true according to Scripture:

For example, in John 9:1, the disciples (reflecting popular belief) concluded that a man was born blind either because he had sinned or his parents had sinned. But Yeshua declared that he was born that way so that the works of God could be displayed in Him (v. 2). Likewise, in John 11:4 Yeshua declared that Lazarus was sick (before he died) so that God might be glorified. So biblically speaking, it is difficult to assign punishment and reward just based on the apparent circumstances of life, like it was believed among the Greeks and Romans, and many people today.

Moreover, the ultimate biblical message about justice is that God loves justice (Ps 33:5; 37:8) and always carries out justice (Dt 32:4). So there always is a price to be paid for sinful behavior. But unlike other religions and the pop theology of our world, according to the way of Adonai, sinful people do not have to bear all of the consequences alone. Because in His grace and mercy, He is willing to bear them for us:

“for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Messiah Yeshua; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed” (Rom 3:23-25).

All this to say that the biblical message contrasts greatly the perception held by many people in this world, all the way back to this day described in the book of Acts. People look at negative circumstances and conclude that the sufferer is really a sinful person, while God looks at sinful people and takes on the most negative circumstance of all—bearing our sins sacrificially.

- vv. 5-6 – When Paul never experienced any physical consequences from being bitten, the people concluded he was a god because, in keeping with the mythological worldview, a person who overcomes the acts of gods, like Dike administering justice, that person him/herself must actually be divine. They had no concept of a person receiving grace and mercy from God.
- vv. 7-9 – Paul returned to his usual behavior by healing the sick and diseased.
- vv. 10-13 – After three months on Malta, they set sail on another ship from Alexandria, and along the way, they stopped at Syracuse on the island of Sicily, and then two cities on the “boot” of Italy.
- v. 14 – At the second city of Puteoli, they stayed with some believers in Yeshua for seven days. Paul had never been there before and he had been the primary means for spreading the gospel throughout the region. But a believing community could already have been established there as the result of the testimony of the Jews who returned to Rome as believers after the day of Shavuot in chapter 2 or through the spreading of the gospel independently of Paul. Apollos, for example, was also serving as an itinerant evangelist.
- v. 15 – The rest of the journey was completed by walking 130 miles to the city of Rome. Along the way, other believers joined them at a couple of places and we are told that by coming alongside Paul, it was an encouragement to him. Their actions show the importance of supporting other people going through trials, and simply “walking with them” through the experience. Likewise, when we go through trials ourselves, we need to know that we are not alone when we go through them.

28:16-31

- v. 16 – Paul was allowed to live in his own home in Rome, although a soldier continued to guard him.
- vv. 17-20 – In keeping with his custom, Paul first spoke to his fellow Jewish people. In this case they had to come to him, rather than Paul going to the local synagogue as before.
- vv. 21-22 – In this case, unlike the situation in Jerusalem, there were no issues that the Jewish community of Rome had with Paul.
- v. 23 – His message was classic Jewish evangelism—talking about the nature of the kingdom and working through Messianic prophecy. Those issues were not relevant issues to Gentiles, and were not part of his approach when witnessing to them. But they were very relevant to Jews. So once again, Paul put into practice his principle of adapting the message to his audience (see also 1 Cor 9:19-23).
- v. 24 – Typically, some Jews believed while others did not.
- v. 25 – And equally typical, they did not even agree with one another.
- vv. 26-27 – Paul quoted from Isaiah 6:9-10 as a means of warning these Jewish people to avoid

making the same mistake as their ancestors who stubbornly resisted the prophetic message that had been given to them. In Isaiah's day, when the Jewish people rejected his message, they faced divine judgment and were sent into captivity in Babylon. So, in keeping with this comparison, there would be serious consequences for rejecting Paul's message.

This result completes the understanding of the issue of justice that was raised earlier in the chapter because God is willing to take on the consequences of our sin, by dying in our place. But you have to accept that sacrifice on your behalf. And if you reject it, then the consequences will fall on you alone. That is being symbolized here in Paul's encounter with these Roman Jews. God has communicated His message that He will provide a solution to our sin. Now it is up to us to accept it or reject it, and then being blessed with grace or facing some very grave consequences.

- v. 28-30 – At this point Luke stops using the word “we” when describing the events. It is likely that Luke left him at this point in order to continue his own ministry. So while the actual story of Paul's life continued, Luke was not present to write about it as an eyewitness. All we are told is that Paul continued ministering to everyone who came to him in his house arrest. And we know that he wrote several of his epistles from Rome.

At the conclusion of Acts we are left with an important unanswered question—did Paul ever stand before Nero, who was Caesar at that time? Since he was told so in advance by Yeshua and reaffirmed by an angel, we can confidently conclude that it took place. Also, there is testimony of the occurrence by ancient historians and by Paul himself:

- According to the early church historian Eusebius, Paul defended himself successfully before Nero and was released before going forth to proclaim the gospel again (*Hist. Eccl. ii. 21*).
- Jerome gives the same account, while adding that Paul headed west upon his release (*Hieron. Catal Script*).
- Chrysostom indicates that he made it to Spain (*Chrysost. on 2 Tim. iv. so*).
- Afterward Eusebius states that Paul was brought before Nero a second time and he was then martyred (*Hist. Eccl. ii. 21*).
- It is believed that Paul wrote his second epistle to Timothy right before he execution, for he talks about the “time of his departure” having come (1 Tim 4:6). And he talks about having people stand with him at his first defense [before Nero], but having none the second time (v. 16).

So it is believed that he was killed around the year 67 A.D. At the same time Nero practiced a horrific persecution of Christians until his own death in 68 A.D.

What we can say with great confidence is that Paul remained a faithful witness until the end of his life. And the world has been forever changed because of his faithfulness.