

Acts 28:16-31: Biblical Reading and Reflections

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 07 December 2020

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Acts chapter 28 verses 16 to 31. And when we came into Rome, Paul was allowed to stay by himself, with the soldier who guarded him. After three days he called together the local leaders of the Jews, and when they had gathered, he said to them, Brothers, though I had done nothing against our people or the customs of our fathers, yet I was delivered as a prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans.

When they had examined me, they wished to set me at liberty, because there was no reason for the death penalty in my case. But because the Jews objected, I was compelled to appeal to Caesar, though I had no charge to bring against my nation.

For this reason, therefore, I have asked to see you and speak with you, since it is because of the hope of Israel that I am wearing this chain. And they said to him, When they had appointed a day for him, they came to him at his lodging in greater numbers.

From morning till evening he expounded to them, testifying to the kingdom of God, and trying to convince them about Jesus, both from the law of Moses and from the prophets.

And some were convinced by what he said, but others disbelieved. And disagreeing among themselves, they departed after Paul had made one statement. The Holy Spirit was right in saying to your fathers through Isaiah the prophet, Go to this people and say, You will indeed hear, but never understand, and you will indeed see, but never perceive.

[1 : 4 1] For this people's heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed. Lest they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and turn, and I would heal them.

Therefore, let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles. They will listen. 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.

It is the end of Acts chapter 24. Paul has finally reached his destination of Rome, where he is under house arrest awaiting his trial. Luke, who has accompanied Paul on his journey, leaves off his telling of Paul's story rather inconclusively.

We don't discover the outcome of his trial. However, the themes of the book of Acts are given some degree of recapitulation, and receive some resolution in this chapter, while leaving the story of the church, which continues far beyond its pages, still open-ended.

In Rome, Paul is granted a high degree of liberty, especially considering the fact that he is a prisoner. He is permitted to live by himself, presumably in rented accommodation in an apartment building, perhaps supported at the beginning by some local Christians.

[3 : 0 2] He only has one soldier guarding him. Julius, the centurion to whose charge Paul was delivered, and who accompanied him on his journey, was favourably disposed to him before they left, and the journey must have impressed upon him much further that Paul was a divinely gifted and pious man, a man of good will who could be trusted.

He had saved Paul's life, and had seen fulfilment of Paul's prophecies and Paul's healings on Malta. Perhaps in part due to his influence, Paul is consequently quite trusted, to the point that he is able to have large numbers of visitors at a given time in his accommodation.

He was presumably also able to write. Many scholars have dated letters like Philemon and Philippians to this period, although the dating of Paul's prison letters depends greatly upon the location from which they were sent, and considerations such as the likelihood or unlikelihood of Onesimus fleeing to Rome.

There are many advocates of the claim that they were sent from Ephesus. Paul invites the local leaders to meet him after only three days. He is presumably regarded as a leader of the Nazarene sect, so they would be quite interested to have an audience with him, to hear what he and his movement were all about.

Craig Keener describes the large Jewish community of Rome. Most Jews lived on the other side of the Tiber from the centre of Rome, and the Jewish population of Rome, a city of about one million, was likely between 20 and 50,000.

[4 : 24] Earlier in Acts chapter 18, Luke had mentioned that Priscilla and Aquila had left Rome after the expulsion under Claudius. Many scholars have speculated that the expulsion of the Jews from Rome had to do with this early Christian movement and the divisions that it caused among the Jews in the city of Rome.

Presumably now, after Claudius' death, the Jewish community is again thriving in the city. They're mostly a poorer population, although there was a range, and most of their leaders would have been well-educated.

Keener suggests the main division with the Jews had occurred earlier, with the Christian community moving into house churches. C.K. Barrett notes that there are 11 synagogues mentioned in the sources.

The Jewish community does not seem to be especially integrated. There isn't a single Jewish leader representing the whole Jews of the city, but a number of independent synagogues with their various leaders.

Paul lays out his situation to them. He is innocent. This is a fact that has been recognised by the Romans and testified to already on three occasions in Luke's account. He is not opposed to the Jewish people, to the law or to their customs.

[5 : 29] However, the Jewish opposition meant that he needed to appeal to Caesar. His imprisonment arises from his commitment to the truth of the resurrection. This is the truth that is the hope of Israel.

This summarises Paul's earlier speech at his various trials and hearings and brings to a nice, tidy conclusion the story of Paul's defences. He has not done anything worthy of death or condemnation.

He has been recognised as innocent by the Romans. He has walked in good conscience and he is loyal to Israel's God. The Jewish leaders have not yet received any letter from the Judean leaders about Paul.

Perhaps letters had been sent but had not yet arrived, given the difficulty of Paul's own passage to Rome and the fact that his company tarried as little as possible on the island of Malta, sailing up towards Sicily and Italy at the earliest possible opportunity in the season.

It is quite likely that any message that had been sent had yet to arrive. The Jewish leaders, however, are aware of the widespread opposition to the Christian movement and they are curious to hear a leader of the movement explain it.

[6 : 33] Paul teaches concerning the kingdom of God. This is language used over 30 times in Luke's Gospel, but only six times in the book of Acts. Twice within this chapter. It's also used in verse 31.

It's similar to the way that the content of Christ's teaching is described. Paul presents his case, arguing from the law of Moses and from the prophets. The whole scripture testifies that Jesus is the Christ.

And some of them are in the process of being persuaded, but others disbelieve. Tannehill suggests that they were not actually fully believing. They were in the process of being persuaded, but they had not yet committed themselves.

This might help to explain the force of Paul's response that follows. As a community, the Jews make some promising moves in the direction of Paul's message, but apart from a few exceptions, they turn away.

Paul makes a strong statement against them. He references the prophecy of Isaiah, taken from Isaiah chapter 6, the chapter of Isaiah's call. There this prophecy precedes a statement of coming judgment in verses 11 to 13.

[7 : 36] Then I said, How long, O Lord? And he said, Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is a desolate waste, and the Lord removes people far away, and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land.

And though a tenth remain in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak, whose stump remains when it is felled. The holy seed is its stump. Their eyes are unable to see, and their ears to hear.

This continues motifs that have been playing throughout the book of Luke, and the book of Acts. We can think about Zechariah, who was struck deaf and dumb. Paul was struck blind, and then later received his sight at his conversion.

Elimus the sorcerer was struck blind. Paul referenced blindness in the context of describing his commission, in chapter 26, verses 16 to 18. But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me, and to those in which I will appear to you, delivering you from your people, and from the Gentiles, to whom I am sending you to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.

This is not a final rejection of the Jews. A similar sort of scene has occurred in several cities previously. Paul will be rejected by the Jews in one city, and he will go to the Jews in the next.

[9 : 07] However, this is part of a progressive judgment of blindness falling upon them. We should also appreciate the importance of the quotation from Isaiah at this point. It sums up something of the thrust of the book.

Among other things, we should notice that it alters the quotation. Isaiah reads as follows, And he said, Go and say to this people, Keep on hearing, but do not understand. Keep on seeing, but do not perceive.

Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes, lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.

Acts, by contrast, reads, Go to this people and say, You will indeed hear, but never understand, and you will indeed see, but never perceive. For this people's heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and turn, and I would heal them.

The imperatives of Isaiah have become finite verbs. For instance, Make the heart of this people dull has become For this people's heart has grown dull. The situation that Isaiah was supposed to bring about through his ministry has now come about.

[10 : 20] The judgment has fallen. The book began with Jesus' teaching, in chapter 1, verse 3. He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during 40 days, and speaking about the kingdom of God.

And it ends with Paul speaking in the same manner. The fate of Paul is not actually given to us in this book. Considering that so much of the book is concerned with Paul, this might seem anticlimactic.

It might seem as if Luke has left us hanging. Very early tradition, in 1st Clement, chapter 5, verses 5 to 7, likely written before the end of the first century, suggests that Paul survived this trial.

Through envy, Paul too showed by example the prize that is given to patience. Seven times was he cast into chains. He was banished. He was stoned. Having become a herald, both in the east and in the west, he obtained the noble renown due to his faith.

And having preached righteousness to the whole world, and having come to the extremity of the west, and having borne witness before rulers, he departed at length out of the world, and went to the holy place, having become the greatest example of patience.

[11 : 27] Eusebius, in his ecclesiastical history, writes in book 2, chapter 22, Festus was sent by Nero to be Felix's successor. Under him, Paul, having made his defence, was sent bound to Rome.

Aristarchus was with him, whom he also somewhere in his epistles quite naturally calls his fellow prisoner. And Luke, who wrote the Acts of the Apostles, brought his history to a close at this point, after stating that Paul spent two whole years at Rome as a prisoner at large, and preached the word of God without restraint.

Thus, after he had made his defence, it is said that the apostle was sent again upon the ministry of preaching, and that upon coming to the same city a second time, he suffered martyrdom.

In this imprisonment, he wrote his second epistle to Timothy, in which he mentions his first defence and his impending death. But hear his testimony on these matters. At my first answer, he says, He plainly indicates in these words that on the former occasion, in order that the preaching might be fulfilled by him, he was rescued from the mouth of the lion, referring in this expression to Nero, as is probable on account of the latter's cruelty.

He did not therefore afterward add the similar statement, He will rescue me from the mouth of the lion, for he saw in the same spirit that his end would not be long delayed. Various theories for why Luke ends at this point in the story of Paul have been given.

[13 : 05] Daryl Bach lists four. First, that Luke might have planned a third volume. This is highly unlikely. There's very little within this volume that points forward to an expected third. Second, that Paul was released after two years because his opponents failed to appear as witnesses.

Joseph Fitzmaier defends this position. Again, this suggestion seems unlikely. Third, that Paul died or was martyred and the outcome was negative or anticlimactic. That again would be surprising.

Luke already recounted the martyrdom of Stephen and it would seem to be quite fitting for him to bring the book to an end with the martyrdom of Paul, who was first introduced to us as a participant in the martyrdom of Stephen.

The fourth suggestion is that the book was about the arrival of the word of Christ to the highest levels of Rome. The eye of the narrative is following Paul on his missions, but the book is not ultimately about him.

It's about the continuing work of Christ and the growth of the word of the gospel. Hence, the book ends with the bold preaching of the kingdom of God in Rome rather than with the outcome of Paul's trial.

- [14 : 08] The book began with the movement out from Jerusalem. Fittingly, the book ends in Rome, the heart of the empire. This movement out is anticipated in chapter 1 verse 8. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.

Paul's arrival in Rome has been anticipated at several points previously as well. Acts chapter 19 verse 21. Now after these events, Paul resolved in the spirit to pass through Macedonia and Achaia and go to Jerusalem saying, After I have been there, I must also see Rome.

Acts chapter 23 verse 11. The following night, the Lord stood by him and said, Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome.

Acts chapter 27 verses 23 to 24. For this very night, there stood before me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship. And he said, Do not be afraid, Paul.

You must stand before Caesar and behold, God has granted you all those who sail with you. Ending with this quotation from Isaiah also throws our mind back to the ministry of Christ himself.

- [15 : 16] In Luke chapter 8 verses 9 to 10, he also refers to this quotation. And when his disciples asked him what this parable meant, he said, To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God, but for others, they are in parables, so that seeing they may not see and hearing they may not understand.

The book of Acts begins with the question of what Christ's death and resurrection means for Israel and whether Israel will accept it. Will the kingdom be restored to Israel at that time?

The book relates not just the movement of the gospel out into the wider world, but the Jews' ongoing rejection of the message, anticipating the judgment that will later fall upon Jerusalem in AD 70.

Paul still has hearers among the Jews, as we see in these final verses, but for the most part, the people have rejected their Messiah. A question to consider, are there any other prominent themes from the book of Acts that you can see reappearing in this final passage?