

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

An Exposition

by

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CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

The final stage of the journey to Rome, the Apostle's arrival there and a brief account of how he called the Jews together in a meeting and delivered them an important message, form the ending of this book.

I. In the Island of Melita (Verses 1-10).

II. The arrival in Rome (Verses 11-16).

III. Paul calling the chief of the Jews and his message (Verses 17-29).

IV. The Apostle's activity in Rome (Verses 30-31).

I. In the Island of Melita.

“And when they were escaped, then they knew that the island was called Melita. And the barbarous people shewed us no little kindness: for they kindled a fire, and received us every one, because of the present rain, and because of the cold. And when Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks, and laid them on the fire, there came a viper out of the heat, and fastened on his hand. And when the barbarians saw the venomous beast hang on his hand, they said among themselves, No doubt this man is a murderer, whom, though he hath escaped the sea, yet vengeance suffereth not to live. And he shook off the beast into the fire, and felt no harm. Howbeit they looked when he should have swollen, or fallen down dead suddenly: but after they had looked a great while, and saw no harm come to him, they changed their minds, and said that he was a god. In the same quarters were possessions of the chief man of the island, whose name was Publius; who received us, and lodged us three days courteously. And it came to pass, that the father of Publius lay sick of a fever And of a bloody flux: to whom Paul entered in, and prayed, and laid his hands on him, and healed him. So when this was done, others also, which had diseases in the island, came, and were healed. Who also honoured us with many honors; and when we departed, they laded us with such things as were necessary” (Verses 1-10).

Melita, which means “*honey*,” is the island of Malta. It was even then a prominent place for navigation where many vessels wintered.

Luke calls the inhabitants Barbarians, a term used by the Greeks for all peoples who did not speak their language. The wrecked company was not plundered by the people of the island, but instead received much kindness and were made comfortable in the cold rain which fell. Those who apply all this in an allegorical way, find much meaning in this. *

* The shipwreck is often applied allegorically to the wrecking of Christianity by the world under Constantine the Great and in the name of Melita (*Honey*) they see an indication that the professing church supposed then to have reached “**the land which flows with milk and honey.**” But so many other allegorical meanings, many of them forced, are made, that we do not consider such applications at all. The primary meaning of the account is to give us the history of how Paul reached Rome.

It was God who moved the hearts of these islanders to show such hospitality to the shipwrecked company for the sake of His servants. Paul is active even then. The shipwreck and privations must have told on the great man of God physically, yet we see him going about gathering a bundle of sticks for the fire. This labor must have been difficult, since as a prisoner he wore a chain on his hands.

A viper, which had been benumbed by the cold and revived by the heat of the fire, fastened on his hand. The serpent did him no harm and he cast it into the fire, where it found a miserable end. We doubt not it was a poisonous viper. This is denied by some critics on the plea that poisonous snakes are not found in the island of Malta. However, that is no proof that such did not exist at that time. The inhabitants of the island expected Paul to fall dead. If it had been a harmless snake, why such an expectation?

God’s power was manifested in his behalf; it was unquestionably a fulfillment of the promise in Mark 16:18, “**they shall take up serpents . . . and it shall not hurt them.**” How Satan tried to hinder Paul from reaching Rome; how he attempted to oppose God’s will and God’s plan! By the murderous Jews, by the storms of the sea, the suggestion of the soldiers to kill the prisoners, and now by the viper Satan tried to frustrate the Lord’s plan. But God kept His servant and no harm could come to him. In the same keeping all His people rest. We are safe under Him, our omnipotent Lord.

The viper which fastened on Paul’s hand reminds us of Satan, that old serpent. He is a conquered enemy. He attacks us, he will fasten on us wherever he can; we are told to resist the devil and he will have to flee from us. In a believing, conscious union with Christ, all his attacks will prove harmless, till at last Satan shall be bruised under our feet and the serpent will be cast into the Lake of Fire.

Then there was a manifestation of the gracious power of the Lord towards the inhabitants of the island. Publius, the chief man of the island, had shown also much kindness to the apostle and his companions. The father of Publius was severely sick; Paul visited him and after prayer and the laying on of hands he was healed. As this became known, others who were afflicted with diseases came and were healed. The Lord honored His servant and did good to those, who had shown kindness to His own. Along with the healing of diseases, the Apostle must have preached the blessed Gospel.

II. The Arrival in Rome.

“And after three months we departed in a ship of Alexandria, which had wintered in the isle, whose sign was Castor and Pollux. And landing at Syracuse, we tarried there three days. And from thence we fetched a compass, and came to Rhegium: and after one day the south wind blew, and we came the next day to Puteoli: Where we found brethren, and were desired to tarry with them seven days: and so we went toward Rome. And from thence, when the brethren heard of us, they came to meet us as far as Appii Forum, and the Three Taverns; whom when Paul saw, he thanked God, and took courage. 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” (Verses 11-16).

Three months had gone by - the winter months, during which navigation was at a standstill. An Alexandrian vessel, which had wintered in the safe harbor of Melita, carried the company towards their destination, Puteoli, the harbor of Rome. This was in the early part of Spring. After landing at Syracuse (Sicily), and tarrying there for three days, they reached Rhegium, in the straits of Messina, and the next day they came to Puteoli, in the Bay of Naples, almost one hundred and forty miles from the city of Rome.

In Puteoli, where a large Jewish colony was situated, they found brethren, who entreated them to stop with them for a week. What an oasis of blessing this must have been for the wearied and tired servants of the Lord! One would almost wish it would have pleased the Holy Spirit to give us a fuller account of the blessed fellowship they must have enjoyed together.

And so they came to Rome. The brethren in Rome knew in some way of their coming. They came to meet them as far as Appii Forum and the Three Taverns. Most likely two different companies of brethren are indicated. The first company met them at Appii Forum, some forty miles from Rome, and the second company at the Three Taverns, some ten miles further on. The news of the Apostle's coming must have been conveyed to Rome from Puteoli. Perhaps the two companies represented the Jewish believers and the Gentile Christians, of which the church in Rome was composed. With what anticipation they must have looked forward to seeing the Apostle, whose face they had never seen. His blessed Epistle addressed to the Saints of God in Rome, the Beloved of God, had been in their possession for a number of years and had brought untold blessings to their souls. How often they must have read his words, in the beginning of his letter:

“I long to see you, that I may impart unto you some spiritual gift, to the end ye may be established; that is, that I may be comforted together with you by the mutual faith both of you and me. Now, I would not have you ignorant, brethren, that oftentimes I proposed to come unto you (but was hindered hitherto), that I might have some fruit among you also, even as the rest of the Gentiles” (Romans 1:11-13).

He had never been in Rome. The Roman assembly was not founded by Paul and certainly not by Peter. The origin of that church is obscure and the Holy Spirit has not given us a history of the beginning of the church in Rome. And now he whom they all loved, whose face they longed to see, was actually on the way to visit Rome.

But in a far different way did he come than he expected when he wrote his Epistle. He came as the prisoner of the Lord. What a meeting it must have been!

The record tells us that when Paul saw these beloved brethren, who had shown such love to him by meeting him on the way to accompany him to Rome, that he thanked God and took courage.

It is evident that he must have been cast down and depressed in his spirit. How many questions must have been upon his mind! Perhaps anxiety concerning the assembly in Rome also weighed upon him. He faced difficulties on all sides. But when he saw the brethren and the evidences of their love, the cloud passed and he thanked God and took courage. Anew he cast himself on the Lord, whose faithfulness and power had been so marked in his experience.

There is no better way to meet all depression, anxious feeling, difficulties and obstacles, than the way of thanking God and taking courage, which means, confidence in the Lord. After leaving the Three Taverns, the great Appian Way led them for thirty miles across the Campagna to the great city, the city of power, the mistress of the world, the city of the seven hills the mystical Babylon. In Rome at last.

What emotions must have filled the hearts of Paul, Luke and Aristarchus when they entered Rome! It is written in Genesis 12:5, **“and they went forth to go into the land of Canaan; and into the land of Canaan they came.”** They went forth to go to Rome and to Rome they came. The Lord had brought them safely to their destination.

Julius then delivered the prisoners to his official superior.

But Paul is not in the hands of the Romans, but in the hands of the Lord. He guards him. He was permitted to dwell in his own house with a soldier alongside of him.

III. Paul calling the chief of the Jews and his message.

“And it came to pass, that after three days Paul called the chief of the Jews together; and when they were come together, he said unto them, Men and brethren, though I have committed nothing against the people, or customs of our fathers, yet was I delivered prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans: Who, when they had examined me, would have let me go, because there was no cause of death in me. But when the Jews spake against it, I was constrained to appeal unto Caesar; not that I had aught to accuse my nation of. For this cause therefore have I called for you, to see you, and to speak with you: because that for the hope of Israel I am bound with this chain. And they said unto him, We neither received letters out of Judea concerning thee, neither any of the brethren that came shewed or spake any harm of thee. But we desire to hear of thee what thou thinkest: for as concerning this sect, we know that every where it is spoken against. And when they had appointed him a day, there came many to him into his lodging; to whom he expounded and testified the kingdom of God, persuading them concerning Jesus, both out of the law of Moses, and out of the prophets, from morning till evening. And some believed the things which were spoken, and some believed not.

And when they agreed not among themselves, they departed, after that Paul had spoken one word, Well spake the Holy Ghost by Esaias the prophet unto Our fathers, Saying, Go unto this people, and say, Hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing ye shall see, and not perceive. For the heart of this people is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes have they closed; lest they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them. Be it known therefore unto you, that the salvation of God is sent unto the Gentiles, and that they will hear it. And when he had said these words, the Jews departed, and had great reasoning among themselves” (Verses 17-29).

And now it is for the very last time in this book **“to the Jew first.”**

The first service the great Apostle rendered in Rome was not in the assembly, but he called the chief of the Jews together. He knew no bitterness in his heart against the Jews.

In writing the letter to the Romans he had written, **“I say the truth in Christ, I lie not, my conscience also testifying with me in the Holy Spirit, that I have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart. For I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh”** (Romans 9:1-2).

“Brethren, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for them is, that they might be saved” (10:1).

And now, after all the sad experience he had made, the treatment he had received from his kinsmen, after he had found out their malice and deep hatred, the same love burns in his heart and the same yearning for their salvation possesses him.

In Rome he manifests first of all his loving interest in his Jewish brethren.

To these leading Jews he testified once more that he was innocent of any wrong doing. Briefly, he rehearsed his whole case and why he had been compelled to appeal to Caesar. For this purpose to talk to them about this matter - he had called them.

Then most likely he must have lifted his hands, from which the prisoner’s chain dangled, and said, **“because for the hope of Israel I am bound with this chain.”**

The Jews, however, wanted to hear more from his lips of - **“what thou thinkest; for as concerning this sect, we know that everywhere it is spoken against.”** They knew he believed in Christ.

A great meeting took place a short time later.

Many Jews assembled in Paul’s lodging. The meeting lasted from morning till evening. Once more he testified the Kingdom of God to a large company of Jews. He also persuaded them concerning Jesus both out of the laws of Moses and out of the Prophets.

What a wonderful message must have come from his lips as he unfolded the prophetic testimony concerning the Messiah in the power of the Spirit of God!

But what was the result?

Some believed and some believed not. They did not agree amongst themselves. The end of God's gracious way with the Jews is reached. We repeat for the last time, it was to the Jew first. The final crisis is reached. Judgment must now be executed upon the nation and the blindness is now to come, which has lasted so long and will continue till the fullness of the Gentiles is come in (Romans 11:26).

Stephen, whose death young Saul had witnessed and approved (8:1), had pronounced judgment upon the nation, in Jerusalem. God's mercy had still waited. Marvelous Grace, which took up the young Pharisee, Saul, and made him the Apostle to the Gentiles! Through him, the chosen instrument, the Lord still sought his beloved Israel, even after Jerusalem had so completely rejected the offered mercy.

We have seen how the Apostle's intense love for his brethren had led him back to Jerusalem, though warned repeatedly by the Holy Spirit. And now he is used to give the very last message to the Jews and speak the final word of condemnation.

It is interesting to see how the Spirit of God quotes through the Apostle the message of judgment, which was given to Isaiah over 700 years before.

How long-suffering God is. What infinite patience and mercy He manifested in dealing with Israel. Isaiah had announced the hardening judgment, and God waited 700 years before it was finally accomplished.

Twice before these words from Isaiah 6 are mentioned in the New Testament.

In Matthew 13:14-15, they are spoken by our Lord after the people had rejected Him and the Pharisees had charged him with driving out the demons by Beelzebub, the prince of demons. They rejected Him, whom the Father had sent. Again, we find the Lord making use of these words at another occasion.

In John 12:37-41, they are applied after the full rejection of the Son Himself and His testimony.

Here in our passage they are used for the last time. The rejection is now complete and the result is the threatened blindness rests upon the nation.

But we must not forget that the Spirit of God had announced all this in the Epistle to the Romans. The eleventh chapter unfolds the Jewish question and assures us that in spite of all this, the blindness of Israel is not permanent. God has not cast away this people, whom He foreknew. He will yet bring the remnant to Himself and forgive them their sins.

God's gifts and calling are without repentance.

Paul then announced that the salvation of God is sent unto the Gentiles, and they will hear it.

This marks the larger beginning of the world-wide proclamation of the Salvation of God among the Gentile races. And what a blessed description of the Gospel we have here, **“the Salvation of God”!**

This still continues. God takes out from the Gentiles a people for His name. Blessed be God for the preaching of the Gospel in regions beyond, and for the blessed members which are added to His body, the church, in Korea, China, India and elsewhere. But the offer of the Salvation of God to the Gentiles will likewise close.

Romans 11:18-22 contains the solemn message, one of the great forgotten messages of the Bible. Boasting Gentile Christendom will someday be cut off and the broken off branches will be grafted in again into their good olive tree.

The apostasy of Christendom, the wicked rejection of the Person of Christ, the constant and ever increasing perversion of the Gospel of God are sure signs that a change of dispensations is imminent.

IV. The Apostle’s Activity in Rome.

“And Paul dwelt two whole years in his own hired house, and received all that came in unto him. Preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching those things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ, with all confidence, no man forbidding him” (Verses 30-31).

A prisoner in Rome and yet active. He preached the Kingdom of God (not of heaven, the Jewish, earthly aspect of it), and ever speaking of that worthy name, that blessed and adorable Person, the Lord Jesus Christ.

The ending of the book is sad and it is joyous. Sad to see the great Apostle a prisoner, shut up in Rome with his God-given Gospel. Joyous because the last verse mentions the Lord Jesus Christ and an unhindered ministry of the Gospel. The Book begins with Jerusalem and ends with Rome. It is a prophecy of the course of the professing church. The book closes in an unfinished way, because the acts of Christ, the Spirit of God, and Satan, recorded in this book, are not finished. We hear nothing more of Paul, though we know that from the prison the Holy Spirit of God sent forth through him the blessed Epistles, in which He has been pleased to give us the highest revelation. And how much more might be written on all this!

THE END

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