

PAUL'S MINISTRY IN ROME

Acts 28:1-31

Key Verse: 28:31

He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ—with all boldness and without hindrance!

Today's passage is the last chapter of the book of Acts. Of course, the work of the Holy Spirit did not end here. In a way, it signaled a new chapter in church history. Paul arrived in Rome, the center of the world at that time, and began to preach the gospel in a rented house. Through the ministry, the gospel went out to many nations. His humble ministry in Rome is an inspiration to us today. May the Holy Spirit help us to learn Paul's faith and mission vision as we study this passage!

I. PAUL'S MINISTRY IN MALTA (1-10)

Look at verse 1. *"Once safely on shore, we found out that the island was called Malta."* Paul and his companions had experienced a harrowing journey on the stormy sea that ended with a shipwreck. The ship drifted in the middle of Mediterranean for more than 14 days. No one but Paul expected to survive. But by God's grace all of them swam safely to the shore of an island. They found out it was Malta, a small island only 60 miles south of Sicily. This is amazing. During the storm, they were drifting aimlessly. They could have easily ended up in Africa. But when they landed, they were not far from Rome. God led them even through the storm. Sometimes, we feel we are just drifting, going nowhere. But this is not true for the children of God. He knows where we are. We know where we are going. He guides us according to his purpose. It is important for us to put our trust in God in the midst of storms of life.

Look at verse 2. *"The islanders showed us unusual kindness. They built a fire and welcomed us all because it was raining and cold."* They had been constantly in suspense for more than two weeks in a violent storm. Their party included 276 sailors, soldiers and prisoners. They barged in to the island without any advance notice. None of them had their luggage with them. They were hungry, cold and tired. But the islanders did not feel burdened by the intruders. Instead, they showed them unusual kindness. They built a fire and welcomed them all. What does it mean they showed "unusual kindness"? It sounds as though God prepared their hearts to welcome Paul and his companions. God disciplines, but God also shows kindness. Their struggle at the sea lasted two weeks. But God's kindness through the islanders on Malta lasted for three months. Some people only complain to God for giving them hard time. They ask, "Why, God?" Then they ignore God when things are good. But our God is a God of love and kindness. Kindness is part of his character (Ge 39:21; Ps 18:50; Jer 31:3). We should know this. God is kind; so we also must be kind. Kindness is a fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:22).

Look at verse 3. *"Paul gathered a pile of brushwood and, as he put it on the fire, a viper, driven out by the heat, fastened itself on his hand."* During the storm, Paul

encouraged everyone on the ship. This does not mean he didn't go through the hardship. He experienced the same difficult time on the sea. He needed rest just like the other survivors. But he did not sit down, expecting to be served. He got up to gather brushwood for the fire. He was ready to serve, anytime and anywhere. Paul was a servant leader. Jesus taught us to be servant leaders. He said, "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mk 10:45).

As Paul was putting the wood on the fire, a viper, driven out by the heat, fastened itself on his hand. Vipers are venomous snakes. One bite from a viper can be fatal. Paul could have died on Malta, so close to Rome. When the islanders saw the snake hanging from Paul's hand, they said to each other, "This man must be a murderer; for though he escaped from the sea, the goddess Justice has not allowed him to live" (4). The islanders were superstitious. They believed in a god who punishes those who do wrong. They didn't know God the Creator. Paul knew that they expected him to drop dead in any minute. Their fatalism did not cause him to think fatalistically. He did not say things like, "Oh no! After surviving the storm, I am going to die of a snake bite!" or "I am a murderer. God is punishing me for killing Stephen!"

What did Paul do instead? Look at verse 5. *"But Paul shook the snake off into the fire and suffered no ill effects."* Paul didn't even flinch. He remained calm. He had faith in God's promise of protection. Perhaps he remembered Jesus' promise in Mark 16:18, which says, "...they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all..." Now, don't try to test this on your own. You need to understand the context of the promise. This promise of protection is given to those who go out into the world and preach the gospel to all creation.

In the course of serving God, we sometimes experience unexpected snakebites. We can feel the poison of fatalism enter into our bloodstream. People expect us to collapse in defeat. What can we do? Like Paul, we should trust God and shake off the snake into the fire. We should believe in Jesus' promise that he will be with us and protect us as we obey his world mission command.

How did the Maltese react to God's protection of Paul? They watched him carefully. But nothing unusual happened to him (6). They were impressed and said he was a god. They changed their minds about Paul. Their hearts were opened to him so that he could begin his ministry on the island. The chief official of the island, called Publius, had an estate nearby. He welcomed Paul and his companions to his home and showed them hospitality. The official's father was sick in bed with a fever and dysentery. Paul went in to see him. After prayer, Paul placed his hands on him and healed him. It was a miracle. It was fulfillment of Mark 16:18: "...they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well." Then the rest of the sick on the island came to Paul. For three months, he healed them all one by one (9).

What can we learn from Paul's ministry in Malta? He was ready to serve the Lord anytime and anywhere. Because of his faith in God and his serving attitude, Paul became

a blessing to the islanders. As a result, the islanders were happy to care for the needs of Paul and his companions. The islanders honored them and furnished supplies when they left. They had arrived in the island empty-handed, but now everyone had his own luggage. Through his faith and servanthip, Paul became a source of blessing to the people of Malta. May God help us to learn from his faith and servanthip so that we may be a source of blessing to others wherever we are!

II. PAUL ARRIVES IN ROME (11-31)

After three months, when spring arrived, Paul and his companions left the island to sail to Rome. They put out to sea in an Alexandrian ship with the figurehead of the twin gods Castor and Pollux—the Gemini twins. The figurehead was a symbol of the world under the influence of idols and the power of sin and death. It was a world that needed the gospel of Jesus Christ.

From Malta, they sailed to Syracuse, a port in Sicily. Then they sailed to Rhegium on the Italian peninsula. Two days later they arrived at Puteoli (now called Pozzuoli), a port city near Naples, located about 170 miles south of Rome. (Cicero called Puteoli ‘Little Rome.’) Paul stayed there for seven days before traveling to Rome via the Appian Way. Verse 14 says: *“There we found some brothers and sisters who invited us to spend a week with them. And so we came to Rome.”* At last, Paul arrived in Rome. He had first mentioned visiting Rome after witnessing the work of God in Ephesus, more than 2 years earlier. He said in Acts 19:21, “I must visit Rome also.” He wanted to get there as soon as possible. But he was delayed by his imprisonment and trials. He was discouraged. Then the Risen Christ stood beside him and said, “Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome” (Ac 23:11). Later, in the midst of terrible storm, the Lord said to him through his angel, “Do not be afraid Paul. You must stand trial before Caesar...” (Ac 27:24). Now finally Paul arrived in the city. He came there as a witness of Jesus Christ.

Look at verse 15. *“The brothers and sisters there had heard that we were coming, and they traveled as far as the Forum of Appius and the Three Taverns to meet us. At the sight of these people Paul thanked God and was encouraged.”* The Forum of Appius was located 43 miles south of Rome, and the Three Taverns about 35 miles. Why did the believers travel so far to meet Paul? Many of them did not know him personally. But they wanted to welcome him because he was a servant of God. Perhaps they had read his letter he wrote to them from Corinth. What was Paul’s reaction to their welcome? He thanked God for them. He was encouraged by their warm welcome. We should remember that God’s servants are encouraged by our small acts of welcome.

Paul came to Rome as a prisoner. However, verse 16 says that he was allowed to live by himself, with a soldier to guard him. Given the limited freedom, what did he do? Three days after his arrival, he called together the leaders of the Jews and talked with them (17-20). Paul came to Rome as a prisoner, but he was there for a purpose. He came there to share the gospel of Jesus. And he began his preaching first to his Jewish

brothers. He really cared about them. They were his own brothers. When the assembly gathered, he told them that he had done nothing against his people. In saying this, Paul wasn't trying to drum up their support for his release. It was his way of starting a conversation with them before telling them his message about Jesus. He said to them, *"It is because of the hope of Israel that I am bound with this chain"* (20). Paul preached the living hope in the kingdom of God given to them through the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Paul's heart was broken whenever he thought about his Jewish brothers. He said he had "great sorrow and unceasing anguish" in his heart over them (Ro 9:2). Why? They were still waiting for Messiah, not knowing that he had already come to save them and give them a living hope in the kingdom of God.

What was their response? They said that they had not heard anything bad about Paul from their own people. Then they said, "We want to hear what your views are, for we know that people everywhere are talking against this sect" (22). It seems that they had formed a negative view of Christianity. Still, they wanted to hear Paul. They arranged to meet him on a certain day and came in large numbers. Paul was ready to help them. *"He witnessed to them from morning till evening, explaining about the kingdom of God, and from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets he tried to persuade them about Jesus"* (23).

Paul preached to them passionately. He had two main points in his preaching—the kingdom of God and Jesus Christ. He preached the kingdom of God, just as Jesus did. The kingdom of God is near, because Jesus the Son of God came to save sinners. It was time for them to repent and believe the good news (Mk 1:15). This is the first message Jesus preached when he began his messianic ministry. Jesus preached the kingdom of God throughout his ministry. He preached the kingdom of God after his resurrection. Many people, especially young people, are not interested in the kingdom of God, because they feel it is far away. But Jesus preached the kingdom of God. Paul preached the kingdom of God. Why? It is because without the kingdom of God, we are ruled by sin and death. But Jesus came to this world to open the door of the kingdom of God through his crucifixion and resurrection. Paul tried to convince the Jews about this Jesus from the Old Testament scriptures. He was in Rome where the Emperor Nero ruled the world with his military power. But Paul preached the kingdom of God there. He knew that the Roman Empire would fade away, but the kingdom of God is eternal.

How did the Jews receive Paul's teaching that Jesus came to save them and take them to the kingdom of God? Some were convinced, but others would not believe (24). Many of them wanted a political messiah to liberate Israel from Rome. They rejected Paul's message of salvation despite his impassioned preaching. This broke Paul's heart. But he was not discouraged. Instead, he saw their rejection in light of God's word (25-28). Isaiah had prophesied about such people whose hearts are calloused. They would cover their ears and eyes toward the word of God. As we preach the gospel, some students accept the gospel, but there are always some who refuse to believe. Then we get discouraged. But we must have eyes to see things in light of God's word. We cannot dwell on those who close their hearts toward God. We should move on with those who are willing. That's what Paul did. He saw how God's salvation was being sent to the

Gentiles, because they were willing to listen. He declared, *“Therefore I want you to know that God’s salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen!”* (28)

Paul did more than studying with Jews during his house arrest in Rome. He wrote four letters to encourage the believers elsewhere. We call them the prison letters—Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. He was in chains, but the word of God was not chained (2Ti 2:9). He said in Philippians 1:13-14, “As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. And because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear.”

Let us read verses 30-31 together: *“For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ—with all boldness and without hindrance!”* Paul was under house arrest. He could not go to campus to invite students to Bible study. But God sent many Bible students to his rented house. He welcomed them. What was his message? He preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ. He taught them that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures and he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures. He was in chain, but he shared the gospel with one person at a time with all boldness and without hindrance.

Paul’s ministry in Rome seemed insignificant in human eyes. It was humble. But in God’s eyes, this ministry was very precious. We have to remember that Jesus was born in a manger, not in Caesar’s Palace. The ministry of the Messiah began in a manger and later in Galilee. His ministry was not glamorous, but life-giving. Such is the character of God’s work. We should not despise a manger ministry. After much suffering, the Christian church became the official religion of the Rome Empire in 313 A.D. Did this mean people became men and women of faith overnight? On the contrary, the church became corrupt. The leaders compromised with the world behind the magnificent façade of the cathedrals. Soon the Dark Ages followed.

We are a small, manger ministry. We don’t have an impressive church building and glamorous programs. We study the Bible with a few students. What we are doing seems insignificant in human eyes. But we should not despise this ministry, as we help young people to have personal relationship with Christ through our Bible studies and prayers. As Paul did in a rented house in Rome, we should faithfully carry out one-to-one Bible study, planting the hope of the kingdom of God, one person at a time. May God help each of us to be part of Acts Chapter 29, as it is continually written by the Holy Spirit!