

GET REAL.*Series in Acts: Advancing the Gospel***Acts 28:1-16**

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Fill in the blank this morning. “If the Church is going to advance the gospel today, it needs to blank.” It needs to have more church programs? Seminars? Books? Money? Gospel tracts? Persuasive preachers? There’s nothing wrong with any of those things, of course. God uses them all. But I’m going to submit today that if the Church is going to reach more people with the gospel, it needs to get real. I’ll explain what I mean by that in a bit as we turn to the final chapter in the book of Acts. Can you believe it? Chapter 28. Final chapter but not the final sermon. Lord willing, that will be next week.

In this chapter the apostle Paul has a series of encounters with pagans, Christians, and Jews. It makes for a nice summary to Luke’s portrait of Paul and continued gospel advancement. Some are receptive and some resist the good news of Jesus Christ, but he continues to minister to all as he both receives and gives hospitality. It’s also a climactic passage as for a long time Paul has been wanting to go to Rome and we’ve been waiting for him to get there. Well in our text today he finally reaches that destination. Remember last week was an epic adventure at sea. Paul, Luke, Aristarchus, and the 260+ prisoners, sailors, and soldiers rode out a violent storm for 2 weeks before their ship was wrecked at the island of Malta.

I. WINTERING IN MALTA. (VV. 1-2)

“When they had been brought safely through, then we found out that the island was called Malta. 2 The natives showed us extraordinary kindness, for they kindled a fire and took us all in because of the rain that had started and because of the cold.”

So they find out that the island they’ve run aground on is **Malta**, or Melita, an island about 60 miles south of Sicily where they will **winter for 3 months** (v. 11). It’s about 18 miles long and 8 miles wide just to give you some perspective. Ironically, the island means “refuge” or “escape.” Luke is playing on the words here. They found “refuge” at “Refuge”. Some translations use the word “escape”. Once they had “escaped,” they found out the island was called “Escape.” Luke is basically saying it was well named.¹

But they find themselves welcomed by the Maltese. They give them a “warm” welcome by starting a bonfire. Luke says the Maltese displayed “**extraordinary**” or “**unusual**” kindness through the universal language of **hospitality**.² The Greek word is *philanthropia*, like philanthropy. It’s showing unconditional love for mankind or kindness to strangers. As you’ll see, it’s evident that these pagan, unbelieving Maltese held the virtue of hospitality in high regard.

Another term we need to touch on is the word Luke uses to describe the people. Most translations say “native” or “islander” or “barbarian”. The word Luke uses is *barbaroi*, like **barbarian**. But this doesn’t mean they were savages like we think of like the tribes of Papua New Guinea or Brazil. This is a term that was used to describe anyone who did not speak Greek or Latin as their primary language. They were viewed as uncultured. So they aren’t as uncultured as we would think of when we use the term barbarian, but at the same time Luke is highlighting the gospel going to the ends of the earth and from the Jewish perspective, to an uncultured people. They’re not exactly in Kansas anymore.

Specifically, the people on this island were the **Phoenicians**, or as they would refer to themselves, **Canaanites**.³ The Phoenicians/Canaanites lived northwest of Israel in the Lebanon area of Tyre, Sidon, and Ugarit but they developed a trading empire that lasted for nearly a millennium and spread across the Mediterranean all the way to Spain.⁴ They were known for their mastery of sea travel and trading ships. Their primary language and once at one time the premier world language, was **Punic**. It was essentially a Canaanite language closely related to Hebrew, another Semitic languages.⁵ A couple hundred years before this though (218 BC), the island had come under the rule of Rome and archaeological evidence reveals some Greek and Latin were spoken alongside their native tongue.⁶

So to answer the question again, “Why did God allow the storm?” Well, last week we saw God creating an opportunity for the gospel to the 260 some sailors, prisoners and soldiers on board. But also, God wants the gospel to reach these barbarians. And Paul considered himself under **obligation to preach the gospel both to Greeks and to barbarians** in remote places (Romans 1:14). It doesn’t matter who it is, Paul knew Christ died for them and was going to share the gospel with them. And I can’t say they are all gospel-preaching, Bible-teaching, New Testament practicing churches, but they say there are over 360 churches on the island of Malta today. There is a saying on the island that there is a different church for every day of the year.⁷

II. MIRACLES AT MALTA. (VV. 3-9)

3 But when Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks and laid them on the fire, a viper came out because of the heat and fastened itself on his hand. 4 When the natives saw the creature hanging from his hand, they began saying to one another, “Undoubtedly this man is a murderer, and though he has been saved from the sea, justice has not allowed him to live.” 5 However, Paul shook the creature off into the fire and suffered no harm. 6 Now they were expecting that he was going to swell up or suddenly fall down dead. But after they had waited a long time and had seen nothing unusual happen to him, they changed their minds and began to say that he was a god.

So, while Paul is gathering firewood, he grabbed a bundle of sticks where a **venomous snake** had made its home. I don’t know about you, but if I’m Paul, I would’ve been complaining. It’s just difficulty after difficulty for him. However, Paul trusted God’s promise to get him to Rome and had learned how God uses all things for good (Rom. 8:28) and we’ll see how God does that with this snake bite. So he shakes the snake off into the fire and the islanders, superstitious as

they are, interpret this snake bite as a sign that Paul is a **murderer** or **guilty** in some fashion of a serious crime. A “life for a life” in their thinking. Even though he survived the storm at sea, “**divine justice**” has not allowed him to live.

Now, many commentators pointed out, and some of your translations affirm this, that the word **justice** (*he Dikē*) should probably be capitalized – **Justice** – because the islanders here seem to personify justice. This would tell us that they were probably affiliated with superstitious Greek mythological deities such as *Dikē*,⁸ a Greek goddess of justice. You’ve all probably seen Lady Justice with scales in one hand, sword in the other, and blindfolded to symbolize her impartiality. That’s a throwback to paganism.⁹ They’re saying that “Justice” hasn’t allowed Paul to live.

But Paul never dies. He isn’t even phased by it. This is because God overrules it in His agenda to get Paul to Rome. It’s that plain and simple. God has plans and God made a promise. And because God cannot lie, He cannot break His promises and is all powerful, can overrule. Amen? So He does a **miracle**. It reminds me of what I’ll call the doctrine of invincibility. You’re invincible until the Lord says it’s time for you to come home. He knows your first and last day before you’re even born (Ps. 139:16). That doesn’t mean you make harmful decisions, but it means we can trust God is sovereign over our lives and can rest in that. He’ll even frustrate the plans of the wicked as we’ve seen Him do time and time again with people going after Paul.

But this miracle is also functional. For one, it’s a faith-affirming **fulfillment of Jesus’ promise** to Paul. It’s a **fulfillment of a prophetic statement** by Jesus in **Luke 10:19** where He said His disciples would tread on serpents and not be injured, or maybe Mark 16’s comment about picking up serpents and not being hurt (16:18). But it’s also used to **draw the attention of the Maltese to Paul**. When he doesn’t die, they start to think this man is a **god**, very much like what happened at Lystra when Paul and Barnabas were mistaken for Hermes and Zeus (14:12). But this miracle becomes the **catalyst for Paul to meet the leading man (*protos*) on the island named Publius**.

7 Now in the neighboring parts of that place were lands belonging to the leading man of the island, named Publius, who welcomed us and entertained us warmly for three days. 8 And it happened that the father of Publius was lying in bed afflicted with a recurring fever and dysentery. Paul went in to see him, and after he prayed, he laid his hands on him and healed him. 9 After this happened, the rest of the people on the island who had diseases were coming to him and being cured.

So no doubt, **Publius** hears about the shipwrecked crew and the miracle, and he invites them to his estate. He is a wealthy and ruling governor for Rome on the island. But notice again the extraordinary hospitality. He **warmly welcomes and entertains them for 3 days**.

And while they are with Publius, Paul learns that his father is sick with a **recurring fever and dysentery**. Apparently there was a microbe found in the goat milk on Malta that brought recurring fevers for weeks, months, or even years.¹⁰ It was an intestinal, gastric microbe. And I’ll

just say this: I'd rather be bitten by a viper and just get it over with than to die from this bug. It was horrible. But Paul, proving to be a friendly person himself, offers to **pray for this man's healing**. So he prays and lays hands on the man and he is healed. Before long, everyone on the island who needs healing is coming to him and being healed.

The account echoes a healing account with Jesus in **Luke 4:38-40** where Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law. In both cases, Paul in Malta and Jesus at Capernaum, the relative of a host is healed of a fever, followed by great numbers coming to be healed.¹¹ I think this is another intentional **parallel** Luke is making **between Jesus and the apostles**. He's showing us that even though Jesus ascended, He is still alive and ministering through the apostles by the power of the Holy Spirit. Remember, **Acts 1:1** speaks of Jesus life and ministry in the Gospels as only, "*the beginning of all that Jesus began to do and teach.*" But Paul had many critics and in Acts we've seen that many **parallels** also occur between **Peter and Paul** to show that Paul is just as fit to be an apostle as Peter is.

So the miracles are not an end in themselves but given to the apostles to draw peoples' attention to the gospel they preached so that they would believe in Him and have eternal life (Mark 16:19-20; John 20:30-31; 2 Cor. 12:12; Heb. 2:3-4). Remember as you read Acts, there is at this time a massive progress of revelation taking place, new revelation being written, and a shift taking place from the Old Covenant to New Covenant. God was **unmistakably confirming His chosen, authoritative apostles with extraordinary miracles, signs and wonders in extraordinary numbers during this foundational period** (Eph. 2:20). The miracles affirm the message and teaching of the apostles. The difference, however, between the apostles and Jesus is that **Jesus heals in His own power and the apostles heal in the name of Jesus**. Paul prayed and God healed, but not always (2 Tim. 4:20). But that's the pattern we assume today. We pray for healing, accepting of God's will no matter the outcome (1 John 5:14).

III. ARRIVAL IN ROME. (VV. 10-16)

10 They also showed us many honors, and when we were about to set sail, they supplied us with everything we needed. 11 After three months we set sail on an Alexandrian ship which had wintered at the island, and which had the Twin Brothers for its figurehead.

So the Maltese **shower their guests with gifts and needed supplies** as they're leaving. Very generous and hospitable again with their time and resources. After **3 months**, in the early spring, **February AD 60**, they board another **Alexandrian ship** who wintered there also. I'm certain no one was very excited about getting on another grain freighter like this again but there is a slight difference. This ship has the **figureheads of the Greek twin gods Castor and Pollux** on the front. I think this is just more irony or satire by Luke because Castor and Pollux were view as saviors and protectors of sea travelers, and punishers of the guilty.¹² It's underscoring how vain Greek gods are in the situation. Paul's security has nothing to do with pagan gods, whether Dike or Dioskyri (Twin Brothers).¹³ Paul's life is in God's hands (27:23).

12 After we put in at Syracuse, we stayed there for three days. 13 From there we sailed around and arrived at Rhegium, and a day later a south wind came up, and on the second day we came to Puteoli. 14 There we found some brothers and sisters, and were invited to stay with them for seven days; and that is how we came to Rome. 15 And from there the brothers and sisters, when they heard about us, came as far as the Market of Appius and the Three Inns to meet us; and when Paul saw them, he thanked God and took courage. 16 When we entered Rome, Paul was allowed to stay by himself, with the soldier who was guarding him.

So it's a rather uneventful sail 60 miles to **Syracuse**, Sicily, to which I'm sure they are thankful. Storms make you appreciate ordinary, uneventful days. From there they sail about the same distance to **Rhegium** on the toe of Italy with little difficulty. Finally, they reach their destination, **Puteoli**, a main grain port 130 miles south of Rome. This was also a place where people often landed and walked the rest of the way to Rome on the **Via Appia** (Appian Way), which would've taken around **5 days**.

But upon arrival they are **welcomed by brothers and sisters in Christ and stay with them for 7 days** – another wonderful display of **hospitality**. When other believers from Rome hear about their arrival, they journey to meet them coming as far as the **Market of Appius**, 40 miles south of Rome on the **Via Appia**. Others came as far as the **Three Inns**, 10 miles closer to Rome. We shouldn't be surprised to find Christians in Italy already for Paul wrote a letter a couple of years ago to the Romans and mentioning how he desired to visit them. But Paul was only planning to use Rome as a launch pad for going west to Spain. He never imagined that through all the problems he experienced, he would get to speak with Caesar himself and influence many from Caesar's household.

But finally, **4 months** later they have arrived in Rome! His desires are finally fulfilled, and **God's promise is finally realized** (23:11), and he gives **thanks** (v. 15)! This is a climactic moment. God has faithfully carried Paul to Rome in His sovereign way. God knew what He was doing all along. This tells us God's Word can be trusted because God can be trusted. God will accomplish His will in a million different ways that we don't always understand, but we can trust Him in it all. We can carry out our part in His mission while trusting Him to do His part.

And I think it's clear in Acts that part of doing **our part is being hospitable to others**. You even see this in verse 30. Rather than being imprisoned, Paul, as a Roman citizen, is allowed to live in his own rented quarters with an ordinary soldier guarding him. From here, he practices hospitality himself, **welcoming all** to hear about the gospel and learn about the kingdom of God (v. 30). That's **4 instances of welcoming hospitality in the final chapter of Acts!**

At first it might seem odd that Luke would emphasize this Christian discipline and Christian practice of **hospitality** in the advancement of the gospel. But I think it's incredibly **fitting** because the Church started in Acts 1 & 2 with people committed to each other. The word *koinonia* was used early on. **Koinonia**, translated fellowship, meaning "to have in common." The newborn church had in Acts 2:42-47 this ideal **community** where they were one heart and

one mind, doing life together. And it was attractive. God was adding to their numbers daily. They lived like family throughout the week, not just Sunday services.¹⁴ Their homes were a place of gathering and a center for evangelism in the early expansion of Christianity.¹⁵

But I also find the emphasis on hospitality also incredibly **relevant** because relationships are bridges for the gospel and **relationships are fostered through hospitality** – whether that hospitality is **given or received**. If we want to share the hope of the gospel with others or disciple others, it's important to give hospitality and when provided, receive hospitality. To be a welcoming person in heart wherever you are and welcome others into your home. I can't help but think of Rosaria Butterfield's book *The Gospel Comes with a House Key* or *The Engagement Project* study the small group went through at my house. The point was basically, if you want to love your neighbor and make disciples, open your home. Don't isolate. Invite people over. Your house doesn't need to be big or perfect. You don't need to cook a perfect meal. I've burned the meal several times when I had people over. They understand. They do it too. You just need to be hospitable. Even Paul can invite people over to his apartment while on house arrest.

This is **relevant** for us because we are living in a **digital age**. We work online. We study online. We live online. Make friends online. We even do "church" online. Thanks to covid, Zoom is now a household name and almost every store allows you get groceries in your car so you don't run into people.¹⁶ Big tech is heavily invested in the *Metaverse*, a digital, parallel universe where through virtual reality (VR), you can now "socialize," work, and play from home with real voices, facial expressions and body language. Facebook is now *Meta Platforms Inc.* There is even a Christian organization called *Life.Church*, designed to reach people in the Metaverse.

But research is showing that even though we should be more connected than ever, society is experiencing more loneliness than ever, and it's taking a toll on us in many ways.¹⁷ Social media has had harmful effects on social skills. It has damaged our ability to form deep, meaningful relationships.¹⁸

Get real. Be hospitable.

This is why I submit we need to get real and practice hospitality in a digital age. Deep down, we long for real, meaningful community. We were made for it. In fact, one of the inventors of VR, Thomas Massie, wants "virtually" nothing to do with VR anymore (pun intended).¹⁹ He just wants what is real. Things he can touch. Young and old are longing again for real relationships and real contact. Not everybody, but many. We're tired of fake news, fake politicians, and fake friends online that we don't even know. We want real friends. Real community. Real conversations. Real laughter. Real agreements. Real disagreements. Real experiences together. Real love, care, and mutual support. To share your home and lives is attractive in a selfish world and it gives opportunity to share the good news of Jesus – forgiveness of sin, new spiritual life, hope, meaning, purpose.

This is something we need to take seriously. In the OT, God commands the Israelites to be hospitable to strangers and foreigners (Lev. 19:34). In the NT, hospitality is a virtue required of

church leadership (Titus 1:8; 1 Pet. 4:9). Why? Because it is so powerful and so Christlike. Because we too were once weary travelers in our sin and strangers to God, but Christ left His home and came into a world where He wasn't welcome, so that we could be welcomed into the family of God (Heb. 13:1-2, 12-14, 16). He showers on us all the spiritual blessings in the heavenly places and one day He is coming again to get us and welcome us into the Father's House (John 14:1-4). And sometimes we think of heaven as this purely spiritual place where we're floating around on clouds, but for eternity, we're going to enjoy the real, community forever in a sin-free New Earth in a New Jerusalem in resurrected bodies (Rev. 20-22).

If the faith is most-effectively transmitted through relationships – and it is – I would encourage us to love others through hospitality (Heb 13:1-2). Invite people over or out for coffee. Less screen time and more face-to-face time. There is new trend out there where everyone stacks their phones on the table and the first one to touch their phone has to pay or do the dishes. I like that. I'd challenge us to unplug more this year. Have fun together. Pray together. Study God's Word together. Eat together. Get outdoors more or play some board games. Join a small group. Just do community. Start with a friend from church or invite the neighbors over, especially the new ones.

¹ F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 497.

² Steven Ger, *From Jerusalem to Rome...*, 267.

³ Hamilton, M. "Phoenicia, Geography and Demographics of," in *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

⁴ Megan Sautter, "Who Were the Phoenicians?" *Biblical Archaeological Society: Bible History Daily*, October 08, 2022

⁵ David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (PiNTC; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 699.

⁶ More information on the Phoenicians and Punic language:

“PHOENICIA (Gk. Phoinikē). The name by which the Greeks and Romans called ancient Canaan, the coastal region of southern Syria-Lebanon-Israel. Extending roughly from the city of Arwad (Aradus) in the north to Ascalon in the south, the region was inhabited in antiquity by a Northwest Semitic people calling themselves Canaanites or Pon (n)im, the origin of the name Phoenicia (n). In the strictest and narrowest sense, as used by the Phoenicians themselves, Canaan denoted this coastal region alone, dominated politically and culturally in the 1st millennium B.C. by the city-states of Tyre and Sidon.

Phoenician overseas expansion and colonization in the western Mediterranean, undertaken as early as ca. 1200 by the Tyrians and Sidonians, resulted in the emergence of a Greater Phoenicia, comprising two subregions, Phoenicia proper, the historical homeland; and Western Phoenicia. Western Phoenicia comprised the coastal regions of North Africa (from Cyrenaica to Western Morocco), southern and southwestern Spain, northwestern and western Sicily, as well as the islands of Malta, Gozo, Sardinia, Majorca, and Minorca. Most important of the Western Phoenician states was Carthage in Tunisia, founded in 825 or 814 by Tyre. By ca. 500 Carthage had become the dominant political and cultural center of the Western Phoenicians, and in a real sense it supplanted Tyre in importance in the Classical period. At its height, Carthage rivaled Greece and Rome, and Western Phoenician (called Punic, so to differentiate it from Phoenician) was a world-class language as significant as Greek and Latin. Although Carthage was defeated and destroyed by Rome in 146, Western Phoenician language, religion, and culture continued to flourish in Africa and elsewhere well into the 5th century C.E. In this period the Punic language counted among its native speakers the Roman emperor Septimius Severus, the poet Appuleius,

and the church father Augustine.” C. R. Krahmalkov, *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*. “Phoenicia,” in D. N. Freedman, A. C. Myers, & A. B. Beck eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000), 1053.

⁷ Dave Stotts, “Episode 13 – Adventures at Sea: the Island of Malta,” in *Drive Thru History: Acts to Revelation*.

⁸ Charles R. Swindoll, *Swindoll’s Living Insights New Testament Commentary, Volume 5* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2016), 507.

⁹ John MacArthur, *The Last Lap*, January 19, 1975.

¹⁰ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 744.

¹¹ Peterson, 702

¹² Bock 745.

¹³ Peterson, 703.

¹⁴ Jimmy Carter, “A Case for Community in the Bible,” in *Poimenas*. January 17, 2023.

¹⁵ Pat Ennis, “How to Practice Biblical Hospitality,” *The Gospel Coalition*. December 12, 2015.

¹⁶ Jimmy Carter, “A Case for Community in a Digital Age: Technology and Church Trends,” in *Poimenas*. November 16, 2022.

¹⁷ Timothy Fox, “A Modern Epidemic,” *Summit Ministries*. April 26, 2019.

¹⁸ *Ibid*.

¹⁹ *Off Grid with Thomas Massie*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=18_yXt1s2yc