



THE END OF THE BEGINNING

SERIES: *LIFE UNLEASHED*

Acts 28:1–31

49th Message

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This week we come to the conclusion of Dr. Luke's two-volume work of Luke/Acts. For those who like statistics, this is the 49th message in the book of Acts, which began on May 3, 2015. It has been a long, adventuresome journey, especially following in the wake of Paul's relentless energy, spreading the gospel over 10,000 miles, visiting 29 cities, 8 provinces and 2 continents. With great skill, Luke has captured our imagination and held us in suspense, through countless trials, beatings, riots and finally shipwreck, leaving us wondering: How will it all end? Will Paul get to testify before Caesar? Will he be vindicated or condemned? How will the church in Rome respond to his letter? Will he be released for further ministry (i.e. Spain)? How will Paul die? Luke Timothy Johnson explains, "If the endings of books, like beginnings, deserve special attention from those seeking clues to an author's intentions, then Luke's ought in some sense provide a satisfying closure to his narrative argument."¹ On the surface, Luke's ending seems abrupt and inconclusive, leaving many of our questions unanswered. But on closer examination, his ending fits his purposes perfectly, reminding us who the true hero is and pulling us into the drama in ways we could have never imagined.

The final chapter divides into three sections. It begins with a much-needed break from the violent storms, both figurative and literal, to enjoy the embrace and hospitality of a pagan community. In the second section, Paul and his colleagues enjoy rich fellowship on final leg of their journey to Rome. And in final section, Paul gives his defense of the gospel to the Jews in Rome.

I. Ministry in Malta: Hospitality and healing with non-believers (28:1–6)

II. Journey to Rome: Bonds of fellowship with brothers (28:7–16)

III. House arrest in Rome: Apology to the Jews (28:17–31)

The portrait of Paul that Luke paints in this final chapter is iconic of the breadth of Paul's ministry and, by application, of how God desires to shape us to have influence in the world—which we will see as we take in three vistas during this story. To help us enter into the story, I want you to imagine you are Julius, the centurion of the elite imperial Cohort, into whose care Paul was entrusted as a prisoner to be transferred to Rome. You've just survived a shipwreck and are reflecting on the past several weeks. As a Roman citizen and the ship's ranking officer, you had the dual responsibility to transport the prisoners and the ship's cargo to Rome safely and as quickly as possible. Before boarding you received a dossier on Paul, explaining that he posed no threat to Roman law but was being transported to Rome solely because he appealed his case to Caesar, knowing he would not get a fair trial in Jerusalem.

When it was time to board, you noticed Paul wasn't traveling alone. Two friends, one of whom was a doctor, took the time and expense to journey with him. Normally, when someone faces charges by the state, their friends withdraw, but Paul's friends were not ashamed of his chains. Observing Paul and his colleagues relating with a warmth and intimacy that transcended family, you found your heart strangely stirred. When the ship stopped to unload cargo in Sidon, you granted Paul the freedom to go ashore to visit his friends, a sign of unusual trust in a prisoner. You were not disappointed, for in seven days they returned generously laden

with gifts and supplies for the journey, so you didn't have to requisition more supplies on their behalf. In all your years of service, you never saw a prisoner supported with such loving and sacrificial care.

With the onset of winter and dangerous seas, it was a difficult sail to Fair Havens. Throughout the journey Paul watched the sea with concern, and he respectfully advised you against going further, fearing the loss of the ship and all on board. Like Paul, you were deeply concerned about the danger, but you yielded to the experts' opinion. Unfortunately Paul was right, and your decision subjected the ship and all on board to fourteen days of relentless hell on the high seas. You beat yourself up for not being courageous enough to trust what you knew to be right. You were helpless, drowning in despair like everyone else. Just as all hope of being saved was lost, Paul stood up like a mythical hero and took command of all the hearts on board. He spoke of an angelic visitation and a promise from the God he serves that all would be saved, though the ship must run aground. He encouraged everyone to take food for strength and, following his example, you decided to trust in the God he serves.

With the roles now reversed, you found yourself strangely comforted and strengthened for the challenge ahead. When Paul uncovered the sailors' scheme to secure the dinghy to save themselves, you took Paul's words seriously and acted decisively to eliminate the threat. In the final moments the soldiers, fearing some of the prisoners may try to escape, planned to kill them on the disintegrating ship. Once again you were governed by what Paul said—they all make it to the shore, or none of them do. Under your watch, not one life would be lost.

As commanding officer, you were last to leave the sinking ship. Emerging from the sea's baptismal waters, you were grateful just to be alive. Realizing you are caught up in something extraordinary, you decided to keep a detailed diary of the rest of your time with Paul. What you don't know—but what we will see as we now read your diary—is that you are now in Paul's world and you're will be taken captive as his prisoner when the Spirit is unleashed through this man.

I. Ministry in Malta (28:1–10)

A. Miracle on the beach (28:1–6)

After we were brought safely through, we then learned that the island was called Malta. The native people showed us unusual kindness, for they kindled a fire and welcomed us all, because it had begun to rain and was cold. When Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks and put them on the fire, a viper came out because of the heat and fastened on his hand. When the native people saw the creature hanging from his hand, they said to one another, "No doubt this man is a murderer. Though he has escaped from the sea, Justice has not allowed him to live." He, however, shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm. They were waiting for him to swell up or suddenly fall down dead. But when they had waited a long time and saw no misfortune come to him, they changed their minds and said that he was a god. (28:1–6 ESV)

So now, let's read Julius's diary.

Once we made it to shore, we learned that we had landed on Malta, whose inhabitants “were largely of Phoenician extraction, and their language was a Phoenician dialect.”² Luke called them “barbarians,” which simply meant their language was unintelligible (they didn’t speak Greek), not that they were primitive savages. Not knowing the kind of reception our shipwrecked refugees would receive from the locals, we were relieved to see a blazing bonfire and welcoming smiles beckoning us to take cover and get warm.

As I enjoyed the fire’s warmth and scanned the relieved faces of the people, I suddenly realized somebody was missing. I didn’t see Paul. Where was my prisoner? Had he escaped? Suddenly a lone figure broke through the circle and threw a bundle of sticks on the fire. Quickly relieved I thought, there is Paul, doing what he always does, pitching in wholeheartedly to serve others, especially in a crisis. But my relief didn’t last long. Immediately after Paul threw the wood onto the fire, a viper, escaping the heat, fastened onto his hand. I was terrified, thinking that my prisoner survived riots, beatings, stoning and finally shipwreck, only now to be killed by a snake! When the islanders saw the snake clinging to Paul’s hand, they dropped their jaws in horror and begin whispering to one another that he must be a “murderer whom Justice (*Dike*) had at last caught up with since he hadn’t died at sea. (The Greek goddess of justice, or her Phoenician counterpart, was apparently venerated by the Maltese).”³ Paul shook the snake off into the fire, as if it were a minor nuisance, and went back to task at hand, gathering more wood for the fire. But the islanders kept their distance, watching and waiting for him to drop dead at any moment. After several hours, it was obvious Paul was suffering no ill effects and the islanders did an about face—instead of a murderer, this man must be god! But I thought, “Paul may not be a god, but there is surely something divine flowing through him and protecting him.”

B. Hospitality, healings and generosity (28:7-10)

Now in the neighborhood of that place were lands belonging to the chief man of the island, named Publius, who received us and entertained us hospitably for three days. It happened that the father of Publius lay sick with fever and dysentery. And Paul visited him and prayed, and putting his hands on him, healed him. And when this had taken place, the rest of the people on the island who had diseases also came and were cured. They also honored us greatly, and when we were about to sail, they put on board whatever we needed. (28:7-10)

The land near the beach where we landed belonged to a man named Publius, who was the Roman governor of Malta. “As an act of official courtesy, he brought the survivors of the wreck to his estate and entertained them for three days while their respective situations were sorted out and arrangements made for their lodgings over the winter elsewhere on the island.”⁴ In our conversations, I explained how Paul had suffered no harm from a poisonous snakebite, which prompted the governor to ask Paul if he would be willing to visit his father, who was suffering severely from Malta fever. Paul was eager to help. After we escorted Paul to the man’s home, he prayed for the man in the name of a certain Jesus, then he laid his hands on him, and to everyone’s amazement, the man was healed instantly. The governor was so overcome with appreciation he spread the news throughout the island. It wasn’t long before all who were stricken with disease came to Paul to be healed, and each and every one was fully cured.

Seeing Paul in his element, unleashed from his chains, serving and healing all with no regard to status or race, moved me deeply. After three months, all the inhabitants on the island were healthy, whole and full of joy. The islanders were so grateful that they crowned the ship’s company with more than enough provisions for the remaining journey. To be the recipient of love, so mutual, generous and free was a

new experience for me. The islanders and ship’s passengers had little in common before the shipwreck. But at the end, we were like two sister communities rescued from the perils of sickness and death by the God that Paul serves. Looking back, I am deeply humbled and challenged by the lavish generosity, hospitality and open mindedness of these islanders, who were willing to have their worldview challenged and altered by experiences they could not deny.

Vista 1: Here, let’s pause to take in our first vista of Paul among the pagan community and how, as a human being, he can have influence and minister even though he doesn’t speak the language. First, he just entered their world. That is perhaps the simplest and most difficult step. You cannot connect or with people until you step out of your world and walk alongside them or sit with them. Second, we see the importance of **hospitality**, in this case demonstrated through **servicing and healing**, which is crucial to the kingdom of God. Because of the language barrier, Paul couldn’t teach. But he could perform the signs of an apostle, which God gave to Paul through the Holy Spirit as a means of authenticating the message so that all who heard might believe. Through the snake incident, Paul received the opportunity to care for the governor’s father. Just one person. He didn’t go door to door. He just went to one person and offered his services. Then that multiplied to the whole island—loving, praying and healing. That resulted in more hospitality! These people were so appreciative, they brought supplies for the entire ship’s company to make the rest of their journey without Julius having to requisition anything. Even more significant, Publius was the first Christian bishop on this island, and there are now more Christian churches on Malta than you can count.

Hospitality and service are your greatest gift to non-believers. You don’t have to preach! Just meet them and pray for them. They all have needs. Speak to them. Love them. Just do service. The gospel doesn’t need words at times; it just needs loving actions. That’s how Paul changed this entire island for Jesus Christ. I’m always touched by the words of Hebrews that when Abraham entertained those three angels, the author of Hebrews said hospitality is so important because sometimes you entertain angels unaware. We learn so much from the poor, who live simply and give generously. They who had nothing gave Paul everything.

II. The Last Leg to Rome (28:11-16)

A. Voyage to Puteoli (28:11-13)

After three months we set sail in a ship that had wintered in the island, a ship of Alexandria, with the twin gods as a figurehead. Putting in at Syracuse, we stayed there for three days. And from there we made a circuit and arrived at Rhegium. And after one day a south wind sprang up, and on the second day we came to Puteoli. (28:11-13)

When winter had passed, I was able to arrange for another Alexandrian grain ship to take the prisoners and soldiers to Italy. Seeing the twin sons of Zeus (*Δίος κόυροι* = “Sons of Zeus”), the guardian of the sea, carved on the ship’s prow gave me hope the remaining journey would be without incident. After experiencing life with Paul for three months, I just couldn’t bring myself to put him back in chains, so I broke with protocol and freed him of this burden for the next leg of our journey. Sailing north, we reached the harbor of Syracuse on the east coast of Sicily and stayed there for three days waiting for more favorable winds. Then the ship tacked its way up the coast to Rhegium, at the toe of Italy. Our arrival was timely, as a southerly wind rose the following day and we were able to sail to Puteoli in the Bay of Naples in one day.

B. A brotherly escort to Rome (28:14-16)

There we found brothers and were invited to stay with them for seven days. And so we came to Rome. And the brothers there, when

they heard about us, came as far as the Forum of Appius and Three Taverns to meet us. On seeing them, Paul thanked God and took courage. And when we came into Rome, Paul was allowed to stay by himself, with the soldier who guarded him. (28:14–16)

After we arrived, it took little time for Paul to find more followers of his sect, who did not hesitate to open their homes to us as if we were family. I sense that hospitality is a trademark of Paul's sect. For a week's time they shared stories, laughed, cried, prayed and sang to their God. Everything they did and said was so attractive to me, it was all I could do to remain professional and stay on task. Leaving Puteoli, we set out on foot to Rome. After a few miles we came to the famous Roman freeway, the Appian Way, which leads straight to Rome. I thought Paul would be nervous about reaching our destination, since he faced trial, but he couldn't wait to get there.

On the boat, Paul had told me about his old friends Priscilla and Aquila, and how they were Jewish followers of Jesus who lived in Rome until Claudius exiled the Jews. When the edict was revoked, they returned along with many other Jewish believers. Three years ago Paul sent a letter to them by way of his friend Phoebe, saying he hoped to visit them soon. Now he will finally be able to meet them all, many for the first time, which was why he was so excited.

While we were in Puteoli, believers in Rome heard Paul was alive and headed down the Appian Way. They had read his letter and with great joy were anticipating his arrival. Many came to provide Paul an escort to Rome, like they would for a visiting emperor or a returning war hero. The first group walked forty-three miles to the Forum of Appius to meet him. It was an emotional reception, unlike anything I've experienced. When Paul saw them in the distance, he wept with joy. Though they had never met, they embraced him like a long lost uncle they thought was lost for dead. Paul, unable to contain his joy, burst into tears and led them in prayers of thanksgiving. We hadn't gone ten more miles, when another group from Rome met us at Three Taverns with another outburst of emotion. Our celebratory procession continued on and when Rome came within sight, Paul picked up the pace, like a horse headed for his stable. It was as if "everything he had done in his life was a preparation for this moment...when he was going to stand before Caesar."⁵

We entered the city by the Port Capena, and I handed Paul and the other prisoners over to the centurion, who most likely was "the head administrator of the *officium* ("office") of the Pretorian Guard." After I gave him my report, he permitted Paul to rent his own accommodations, while under the surveillance of a soldier, to whom one of his hands was chained (v. 20). When I went to say goodbye, Paul looked at me with tears in his eyes, and it was the first time I ever felt like a son. The influence Paul once had on me will now be multiplied to every soldier he is chained to.

This brings us to the end of Julius's diary and time with Paul.

Vista 2: Our second vista takes in fellowship. Brothers. Sisters. Bonds of Christ. When you have accepted Christ and the Holy Spirit has invaded you, and you meet another believer, no matter who or where or how old they are, and you engage in fellowship, you're experiencing a relationship that is so rich, it is deeper than most physical and familial relationships. It's a gift. Sometimes we take it for granted. When we engage in our hugs, laughter, joy and tears, and the world looks on, they are moved. That's what happened to Julius. These Christians from Rome walked 43 miles to meet and escort Paul. That was 86 miles, round trip! In the week that followed, they must have given a masterclass in fellowship, with love, prayer and the sharing of stories. Don't underestimate the power and attractiveness to non-believers when we share our stories with each other in public places. There's a lot of emotion, joy, tears and laughter. People see it and ask, what are you doing? Who are you guys? And that can lead to conversation and prayer, and everyone witnessing the fellowship that

is the gift of the Spirit. Our fellowship is such a great gift. We must not keep it to ourselves.

III. The Gospel Proclaimed in Rome (28:17–28)

A. Paul's invitation to the Jews (28:17–22)

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." (28:17–20)

True to his principle that the gospel "is the power of God for salvation...to the Jew first, and also the Greek," "even in the Gentile capital of the world Paul addressed himself to the Jews first."⁶ In this case it was especially critical in order to head off future disturbances regarding his gospel. Claudius had expelled the Jews from Rome ten years earlier because of rioting that occurred in connection with a certain "Chrestus" (Christ). Nero rescinded the ban in 54 A.D. and now that a large percentage of the Jews have returned, they certainly do not want to repeat history.

When the Jewish leaders arrive, Paul reviews the history of his case and the course of events that brought him to Rome. He emphasizes his innocence and testifies he has no complaint against the Jewish nation. As Tom Wright observes, "If Caesar was now presented with a Roman citizen (who happened to be Jewish) coming to complain of his treatment in Judea, might that not fuel the Roman desire to deal with troublesome Jews once and for all?"⁷ Paul insists that the issue for which he is bound is Israel's great hope. Paul is a loyal Jew, and the message he proclaims does not undermine Israel's traditions; rather, it is God's fulfillment of those traditions.

And they said to him, "We have received no letters from Judea about you, and none of the brothers coming here has reported or spoken any evil about you. But we desire to hear from you what your views are, for with regard to this sect we know that everywhere it is spoken against." (28:21–22)

To Paul's amazement the Jewish leaders seem to have no knowledge of his reputation and surprisingly very little concern. However, everything they have heard about "this sect" is universally negative. But they offer to come back and hear more.

B. A day of reasoning with the Jews (28:23–24)

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. (28:23–24)

The Jewish elders appointed a day where they could meet and explore Paul's message. They came in great numbers and Paul spent the entire day telling the story he had been telling in every synagogue, beginning in Genesis continuing through the law, prophets and writings, demonstrating in text after text that the hope of Israel is found in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, who now reigns as Israel's Messiah and Lord of the world.

C. Paul goes to the Gentiles (28:25–28)

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.”
 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.” (28:25–28)

As expected, the results after Paul’s day long presentation were the same as in every synagogue where he preached—some were definitely convinced by what he said, but others refused to believe. The straw that broke the camel’s back was when Paul quoted Isaiah’s condemnation of Israel’s hard heart as prophetic of their rejection of the Messiah and, as a result, the gift of salvation being sent to the Gentiles. With that they left the meeting.

Vista 3: So how do we apply Paul’s relationship to the Jews? I call it the mystery of the Jews, and it is the secret to world history. For us, there are three takeaways.

First, never forget God’s faithfulness. God loved his people. He loved them when they rejected him. He loved them at the cross, when He forgave them at the crucifixion. He loved them again when Peter preached at Pentecost. And Paul loved them, saying that he had such great sorrow and unceasing anguish in his heart for them, he wished that he was cut off from Christ for their sake (Rom 9:2–3). It was only after their continued rejection, that he went to the Gentiles to make them jealous, that he might save some of them (Rom 11:13–14).

Second, never forget our roots and privilege. The only reason we’re in God’s kingdom is that we were grafted in after the Jews rejected it. We did nothing to earn it. So we must be thankful for our roots, thankful that we were adopted into the richest spiritual vein in human history. The rich roots of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are our identity. We’re all the sons of Abraham. To know Christ is to know and love the Hebrew Scriptures that he came to fulfill. Therefore, as Paul writes, “do not be arrogant toward the branches...remember it is not you who support the root, but the root that supports you” (Rom 11:18).

Third, never forget God’s vision for the church. “Did they stumble in order that they might fall? By no means!...If they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again” (Rom 11:11, 23). God doesn’t want a church of one race, sex or nationality. He wants Jews and Gentiles together—a church that represents humanity. Any time a church becomes narrow and does not reflect diversity, it loses its impact. Our unity is based on Spirit, not nationality, sex, age, ideological conformity, or anything else. It’s the blood of Jesus and the Spirit of Christ that makes us one family.

IV. Conclusion: The Gospel Unleashed and Unhindered (28:30–31)

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. (28:30–31)

Paul is bound, paying his own way (as always), but the gospel is not bound. He is welcoming all—Jew and Gentile—in Caesar’s household (Phil 1:3). And he is proclaiming and teaching with all boldness, which Stott defines as—speech that is candid (with no concealment of the truth), clear (with no obscurity of expression) and confident (with no fear of consequences).⁸ Even elite praetorian guards come to faith (Phil 4:22). In the end, this story isn’t about Paul. It’s about Jesus and the gospel spreading to the ends of the earth. So, how does Paul’s last scene serve that story? As Stott suggests, his two year custody “expanded, enriched and authenticated” his witness.

First, Paul’s witness was expanded, not only because of the constant flow of people visiting him, but especially because he witnessed to Christ in the presence of Caesar...Secondly, Paul’s witness was enriched by those two years...his prison letters (Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians) breathe an atmosphere of joy, peace, patience and contentment, because he believed in the sovereignty of God...Thirdly, his ministry was authenticated by his sufferings. Nothing proves the sincerity of our beliefs like our willingness to suffer for them.⁹

The final word of Luke/Acts is ἀκωλύτως (akōlytōs)—“without hindrance.” As Wright affirms, “The gospel like the risen Jesus, is alive and active, and is now reaching out to the ends of the earth.”¹⁰ Luke’s ending is “the end of the beginning.” Two thousand years later the baton has been passed to us. Don’t drop it.

May God be gracious to us and bless us
 and make his face shine on us—
 that your ways may be known on earth,
 your salvation among all nations.
 May the peoples praise you, O God;
 may all the peoples praise you. Amen

Psalm 67:1–3 NIV

1. Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, SP5 (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 474.

2. F.F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 521.

3. Richard N. Longenecker, *Acts*, EBC 9; ed. Frank E. Gaebelin and J. D. Douglas; Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), paragraph 52459.

4. Longenecker, *Acts*, paragraph 52465.

5. N. T. Wright, *Acts for Everyone: Part Two*, Chapters 13–28 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 239.

6. John Stott, *The Message of Acts*, BST (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 397.

7. N. T. Wright, *Paul, A Biography* (New York: HarperOne, 2018), 387.

8. John Stott, *The Message of Acts*, BST (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 400.

9. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 402–04.

10. Wright, *Acts for Everyone*, 235.