

Acts Chapter 28

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[0 : 00] If you will take your sheet that is page 637, lower right-hand corner, we are engaging the final chapter in the book of Acts. And this, by the way, is our final Thursday in the month of October.

Next thing you know, we'll be talking about Turkey, so it's not far away. I want to remind you, as we begin this 28th chapter, that it took more than 28 years for these events to occur.

It took about 30 years from the time you open the book of Acts until the time the book closes. So we've got about three decades involved in chronology as you engage the book of Acts, and it's really important to keep that in mind.

You can sit down, read the Acts of the Apostles in probably half an hour, 45 minutes, something like that. And it's easy to lose sight of the fact that it took 30 years for those events to develop.

And that must be kept in mind as you look at the book as a whole. So in the beginning of this last chapter, we want to remind you that the Apostle Paul is under a Roman guard.

[1 : 15] He is under actually protective custody. He is handcuffed to a Roman guard 24-7. They work in six-hour shifts.

And now we are dealing with this horrendous shipwreck that they have just encountered. They were involved in a perfect storm called Euroclidon.

It lasted for two weeks on the Mediterranean, which is, I understand, not unusual. Those kinds of storms still occur. This was a large ship, probably the largest ship that was afloat on the Mediterranean.

It was an Egyptian grain vessel. And they did everything they could to salvage the ship, but it was impossible. It was just beaten up, tossed to and fro.

And finally, when they saw land, they made for the reefs. And the ship, of course, is going to break up on the reefs. But in accordance with what God had revealed to Paul, if everybody stays with the ship, and they prevented the ship's crew from deserting the ship and letting down a longboat to get away, Paul saw what they were doing, and he informed the Roman army officer, these crewmen need to stay on board or everybody's going to be lost.

[2 : 35] So the captain, the Roman army officer who was in charge of the whole thing, even over the captain of the ship, went over and cut the longboat loose so that the crewmen couldn't use it to get away, and they had to stay on board.

And eventually, they made their way to shore, 276 people in all. That includes multiple prisoners. We don't know how many, but they were in danger of all being killed by the Romans because it was assumed that they would use this opportunity to try to escape.

And Roman soldiers knew what happened. If you let a prisoner escape, you were going to serve his sentence, whatever that would be, if he were proven guilty in a court of law. So they were going to put the prisoners to death, and Paul told the captain that nobody is going to escape, and he believed him, and he had gotten good information from Paul before, and they spared the prisoners' lives.

So now they are all making for shore, and we read with chapter 28 opening, and when they were escaped, then they knew that the island was called Melita.

Melita. Actually, the present-day name of the island is Malta, the island of Malta, and it is a delightful little place. If you ever have opportunity to visit there, we did on a Mediterranean ship cruise.

[4 : 07] We spent a few hours in Malta, and it's very historic. It's just a very unusual place. You just have to see it to appreciate it.

The island is called Malta, and the barbarous people showed us. These are the natives, the foreign-speaking people. Rough islanders treated us with no little kindness.

That is, no little kindness means a great deal of kindness. They recognized that these poor people had been at sea, had been in this tremendous storm, and their ship was completely destroyed. They barely made it ashore, some of them on pieces of wood and on anything that would float, and they finally got the shore, and all of the locals, of course, could see all of these people coming up from the shipwreck, and they had human compassion on them, the kindness, and they entreated them kindly, and they kindled a fire.

Remember, remember, this is an adverse sailing season. This was probably early fall, would be my guess, when the weather was just starting to turn nasty, and it was no doubt cold.

[5 : 20] And you'll remember when they set out, Paul told them, Paul told them, it is not a good idea. We ought to stay here at Fair Havens and wait out the winter and lead out.

Well, the Roman army officer went to the ship's captain and said, Paul here thinks we should wait. And the captain said, no, it'll be all right. We can make it. It'll be okay. But, of course, it wasn't okay. And they were at the edge of the sailing season, and, of course, they ran into this tremendous storm, and it's pretty chilly. So they kindled a fire for them and received us every one.

That is, they took us all under shelter. And because of the present rain, it's probably cold, miserable, rainy, just a very, very negative kind of circumstance.

Wabin says, because of the pelting rain, Phillips translates it driving rain, it was miserable, especially when your clothes are soaking wet, whatever it is you're wearing from trying to get ashore, and the harrowing circumstances of that time, it was just a miserable time.

[6 : 27] So the first thing they want to do, of course, is build a fire. In verse 3 we read that when Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks, turn over the page, if you will.

Oh, we've got the next page here, I'm sorry. Page 638 down in the morning. Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks and laid them on the fire.

There came a viper out of the heat. I understand that these vipers of this particular ilk are still there on the island of Malta.

And no doubt what happened was this viper was probably in a kind of hibernating mode. And when the warmth of the fire got to the viper, of course, alerted him, and he started squirming around.

And you read what happens. This viper came out of the heat and fastened on his hand. The text says, Paul has fastened his fangs on his hand, wound itself around his hand, and just dug in with those fangs.

[7 : 36] And this viper was no stranger to the islanders. They had probably seen several of them. Maybe some had even had an encounter with it or knew others who had. And here is this poisonous viper hanging from Paul's hand with his fangs dug in.

These islanders, no doubt, looked at each other and said, Uh-oh, this guy's a goner. Because they knew how deadly that thing was. And verse 4 says, 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.

This is a common mistake that has been made by people as far back as Job. And that is the assumption that there is some kind of divine activity at play here.

And vengeance is being wreaked upon this man, Paul, whoever he is. And God has sent this viper to do him in. This is divine justice.

[8 : 46] Well, we know that it was no such thing. But that just goes to show you how powerful and pervasive superstition is. They just assumed that this was some kind of, I guess you could call it some kind of karma.

This guy has been very nasty and very bad in the past. And now he's getting his comeuppance and God is taking him out by way of this viper. Well, of course, they were completely wrong.

And this, by the way, ought to be a warning to us. Whenever someone, anyone, comes down with some kind of malady or accident or misfortune, we ought never to read into that what we think has happened.

Now, sometimes it's kind of predictable. You know, here is a guy who has been a, maybe a, a sot for most of his life, a real alcoholic, a real imbiber, and has no time for anything or anyone but booze.

And he lives a life like that. And at the tender age of 47, he comes down with cirrhosis of the liver. And the doctor says, he's terminal. He's not going to live without a liver transplant.

[10:00] You might look at someone like that and say, well, you know, this kind of goes with the territory. You live a life like that and there are consequences to pay. And cirrhosis of the liver is a common malady of alcoholics.

And that might be an accurate diagnosis. But all I'm saying is this. All kinds of things happen to all kinds of people. And it's not necessarily some kind of payback.

It may be. It may be. But not necessarily. And what I'm saying is this. We ought to withhold judgment. We don't know. We don't know. And when somebody is killed in an accident at 4th and Main and they were a believer, we say, ah, he must have had some secret sin in his life and God brought it to an end.

That's nonsense. Truth be told, that might be the case. And that also might be far from the truth. So we ought to withhold judgment about things we just don't know about.

And here is a perfect example where they just assume this guy is obviously a murderer and he's getting his due right now. You know, the book of Job is full of that with the miserable comforters.

[11:07] And their ploy was, now Job, it is amazing. You have lived, you have lived such a sterling, wonderful life insofar as everybody could see.

But where we couldn't see, you must have been a real stinker. And God saw you and that's why he's getting even and bringing all of this judgment upon you.

You are just a hypocrite. You put on a good front of living a good life outwardly, but secretly, you couldn't hide your sin from God and now he's getting you for it. And we know from reading the book of Job that was far from the truth.

But people sometimes think they know things that they don't know anything about. And they rush to judgment and they assign motives and everything else. And the moral of the story is back off and keep your mouth shut.

You don't know what's going on in somebody's life, what has precipitated it. You just don't know. So, you don't offer an opinion. And don't be a miserable comforter like Job.

[12:14] Here's a perfect example of that. But instead, instead of Paul dropping over dead like they would have expected within a few minutes, verse 5 says, 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, in other words, they kept looking and they kept watching and one was thinking any minute now he's going to drop over and expected to see his hand and his whole arm balloon up like it does when one of these vipers strikes you.

And that's what they had expected. Then, look what it took. They saw no harm come to him. They changed their minds and said that he was a god.

Good grief. One extreme to the other. First he's a murderer, now he's a god. They jumped to conclusions in both cases and in both cases they were wrong.

And that ought to be a moral to our story about not jumping to conclusions.