

NEW TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

Lesson 53

Acts – Part Ten

Conclusion

Chapters 20 – 28

I. REFRESHER

We return now to Acts in an effort to bring Luke's history to conclusion. Luke's two-part history (Luke and Acts) traces the history of the church from before the birth of Jesus, through his earthly ministry, his death and resurrection, the establishment of the church, and the spreading of the church among the Gentiles and Mediterranean world. Luke's record of the spread of God's kingdom underscores the growth from Nazareth, a small backwoods town in Judea that rejected Jesus, to the very heart and center of the world, Rome.

We have paused in our study of Acts to examine certain letters Paul wrote within the timeframe where he wrote each letter. We left off with Paul on his third missionary journey among the Gentiles while Paul was in Greece (Corinth) as recorded in Acts 20. We pick back up with the narrative as Paul is heading back to Judea. Paul returns to Judea having just sent a letter to the Romans asking them, in closing, to pray for his safe return to Jerusalem, his reception by the church there, and his ultimate plan to get to the church at Rome itself (15:31-32). In these last chapters of Acts, we see God answering those prayers.

II. THE TEXT

A. Third Missionary Journey Finished (20:3-21:16)

While heading back toward Jerusalem, Paul, Luke, and others first stopped in Macedonia and visited some of their sisters and brothers from churches Paul had started earlier.

While in Troas, Paul joined others on Sunday in a communion service (20:7). Paul was leaving town the following day, so he stayed at the meeting teaching rather late, until midnight. A young man named Eutychus was sitting in a third story window listening to Paul. At some point, Eutychus fell asleep as Paul "talked on and on" (20:9). Eutychus fell out of the window to the ground below. Those first to the ground found him dead from the fall. Paul, however, put

his arms around him and God restored life to Eutychus. Not one to let an alarming situation stop a teaching, the young man was taken back upstairs and fed. Paul then resumed teaching until daybreak, when he left. (20:7-12).

Luke and others took the ship to Assos where they reunited with Paul who had walked there. Luke recounts the sailing journey, noting that the decision was made not to stop in Ephesus in an effort to reach Jerusalem by Pentecost. So, Paul sent for the Ephesian elders to come meet with him at Miletus. The meeting is both profound and touching.

Meeting with these elders from the church where Paul spent most of his time over the preceding few years, Luke tells us about Paul's message and the Ephesians' responses. Paul reminded the Ephesians of his sincere love for them and the integrity of his ministry while among them. Paul also told them that he was going to Jerusalem knowing danger and death lurked at every corner. While Paul did not know his fate, he knew he was in God's hands and so he faced his road without fear or hesitancy. Paul was content knowing he would, at some point, finish the race and complete the task God had for him.

Paul did know, however, and did tell the Ephesians that he would not get to see them again on earth. This greatly grieved the Ephesian elders. It made Paul's visit a true goodbye. No doubt they carefully listened to the charge Paul gave them. He urged them to watch not only themselves, but also the church they shepherded. Reminding them that Jesus gave his blood for the Church, Paul emphasized the care they would need as wolves, even arising within the church, would seek to savagely destroy the body.

In the face of that warning, Paul committed the Elders to God and the word of God's grace (the good news of the blood shed for them) that would build them up and protect them and their inheritance in the kingdom. Paul then knelt with the elders and they all prayed. They hugged and cried and then walked with Paul all the way to the ship (20:13-36).

Paul, Luke, and others had to "tear" themselves away from the Ephesians, and they put out to sea. The trip back made several stops visiting and praying with Christians along the way. Eventually, they disembarked at the port in Caesarea. While in Caesarea for several

days, a prophet named Agabus came and found Paul. Agabus took Paul's belt and tied his own hands and feet prophesying,

In this way the Jews of Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles. (21:11)

Hearing this, the tear-filled people begged Paul not to go up to Jerusalem. But, Paul would not be dissuaded. He was ready not only to be bound for Jesus but to die for him as well. With that resolve, Paul got ready, walked out, and headed to Jerusalem (21:1-16).

B. Paul in Jerusalem

In Acts 21:17, we read of Paul's arrival in Jerusalem. The Christians there received Paul, Luke, and others "warmly." The following day, Paul went to see James and the other elders of the Jerusalem church. Paul reported to them all what God had done among the Gentiles. Hearing the report, the Jerusalem elders praised God not only for God's wonderful work among the Gentiles, but also, evidently, because they found the content of Paul's teaching contrary to some of the rumors that had floated around Jerusalem. Some accused Paul of teaching Jews to "turn away from Moses" and circumcision along with the Jewish customs. Of course, Paul had done nothing of the sort. As we read in his letter to the Romans, he merely had put the law and customs into their proper perspective!

Out of concern for how other Jews would receive Paul, the elders asked him to join four other brothers who were undergoing the ritual purification at the Temple. Paul not only joined the brothers, but also footed the expenses involved in shaving their heads and paying the requisite Temple payment (21:17-24).

Interestingly, the elders in Jerusalem note that they had previously written Gentile believers to abstain from food sacrificed to animals among other things. This is contrary to what Paul had taught, but Luke does not underscore the point. The Holy Spirit has not seen fit to keep those letters and place them in our canon of scripture and for good reason! The teaching was not correct! This fact demonstrates that church leaders themselves are not infallible in what they say or teach! Hence, we should measure what we hear and read and test it against what the Holy Spirit has put in scripture!

Paul went with the brothers to the Temple and began his seven days of purification. Before the seven days were up, some Jews from Asia recognized Paul at the Temple. With false and slanderous accusations, the Asian Jews stirred up others claiming Paul had brought Gentiles in to defile the Temple and that Paul had taught people everywhere in ways that were against the Jewish law and people. They dragged Paul from the Temple and were trying to kill him when a Roman Commander heard of the riot. The commander took soldiers and came to the riot. Once the Romans appeared, the rioters stopped beating Paul. The commander arrested Paul, bound him with chains, and brought him back to the barracks. The angry mob followed Paul and the Romans.

Before the Romans placed Paul into the barracks, Paul asked the Commander for permission to speak. The commander was a bit taken back that Paul spoke to him in Greek! The commander had assumed Paul was a notorious criminal from Egypt. Paul explained he was wrong. Paul was from the opposite direction, Tarsus, and what was more, Paul was a Roman citizen! The commander then gave Paul permission to speak to the crowd (21:27-40).

When Paul turned to address the crowd, he changed back into Aramaic for his defense to the Jews, who would have been Aramaic speakers themselves. Paul started describing his upbringing, training, and religious fervor. Paul referenced a number of authority figures who could vouch for the truth of what he had said thus far. Paul then recounted his conversion experience on the road to Damascus. The people listened to Paul until he told them that God had directed him to go to the Gentiles. At that point, they went ballistic and the commander had to remove him into the barracks to protect him.

Paul was ordered to be flogged and question when it was brought again to the commander's attention that Paul was a Roman citizen. Flogging a Roman citizen was illegal, as was putting a citizen in chains! The commander came back before Paul and probed him on his citizenship. In the conversation, we learn that the commander had paid a premium price to purchase his own citizenship. Paul, however, was born a citizen, a fact that spoke highly of Paul and his heritage. The commander had the chains removed from Paul! (22:1-29)

The next day, the commander ordered the chief priests and Sanhedrin to assemble so that he could determine the charges against Paul. Standing before the Sanhedrin, Paul looked straight at them and said, “I have fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience this day.” At these words, the Chief Priest, Ananias, ordered those near Paul to strike him on the mouth. They did so and Paul responded, “God will strike you, you whitewashed wall!” Those near Paul challenged him for speaking thus to the High Priest, at which point Paul apologized, explaining he was unaware it was the High Priest. Paul extended him respect for his office, regardless of how he handled the office.¹

Paul then proclaimed that the basis of his “crime” or persecution was his belief in the resurrection from the dead. That was a wonderfully wise and appropriate thing to say for several reasons. First, it was the truth. It was Paul’s belief in the resurrection of Jesus that was the source of all he did that riled up the Jews. Second, it had an interesting effect on those assembled. There were both Pharisees and Sadducees present. While the Pharisees believed in a resurrection, the Sadducees did not. The meeting broke up into a vigorous debate over the resurrection issue! Some Pharisees actually spoke out in Paul’s favor! The commander brought Paul from that fracas back to the barracks for safety.

Interestingly, God came to Paul the following night and told Paul, “Take courage!” God explained Paul would be going to Rome to bear witness about him. Luke inserts this nugget letting us see God encouraging one as holy and full of faith as Paul himself! (23:1-11)

C. Paul in Caesarea

The Jews against Paul did not share God’s sentiments about his future! Over 40 men took a vow to neither eat nor drink until Paul was dead. They plotted a murderous ambush for the following day. Paul’s nephew overheard the plotting and went to Paul to alert him. Upon hearing the plot, Paul sent the nephew to alert the commander in private. The commander told the nephew to say nothing to anyone else. Then, the commander sent Paul under heavy guard

¹ The way Luke writes this section leads many to believe Paul had a vision problem. It is significant that Luke notes that Paul “looked straight” toward the Sanhedrin. Luke also underscores that Paul was unable to determine that the man ordering him struck was the High Priest.

away from Jerusalem to Caesarea. The commander had Paul delivered to Governor Felix and basically handed off the problem of Paul and his accusers for Felix to figure out (23:12-35).²

Felix held Paul over until Paul's accusers could come and make their case against Paul. After five days, Annanias, the High Priest, and several elders took a lawyer named Tertullus and went to press their case against Paul before Governor Felix (a week later, one can't help but wonder how hungry the 40 men were who had vowed to God not to eat or drink until Paul's death!).

The lawyer, Tertullus, presented the case against Paul, starting with buttering up the Governor, bragging about his reign and foresight. But, his charges against Paul did not have a lot of teeth! He accused Paul of being a troublemaker, stirring up riots, leading a bizarre cult, and desecrating the temple.

Paul then made his own defense to the charges. Paul denied being a troublemaker or desecrating the temple. He did admit to following "the Way," but denied it was a cult or sect. Paul also pointed out the paucity of their evidence.

Luke then tells us that Felix was "well acquainted with the Way," adding that Felix then adjourned the proceedings. During adjournment, Paul was given fairly liberal freedom, and his friends were allowed to interact with him. Felix, who was married to a Jew, called Paul in frequently to listen more about the Way, but was really hoping that Paul would offer him money for release. Paul never paid for his freedom, and ultimately Felix was replaced two years later with Governor Porcius Festus. Felix never released Paul but left him imprisoned as a favor to the Jews (24:1-27).

The two years since Paul was sent to Caesarea did not dull the Jewish leaders' desires to see Paul dead, although I seriously doubt that the 40 men with the fasting vow were faithful to their oath! The leaders asked Festus to transfer Paul to Jerusalem in hopes of another ambush possibility. Instead, Festus had the leaders come to Caesarea to present their case. The case was really without proof, but Festus wanted to curry favor with the Jews, so he asked Paul

² The commander sent a letter along with Paul. The letter, set out in Acts 23:26-30, is a good illustration in short form of the style and layout of a first century letter. It is instructive to compare its form with that of Paul's used in his various letters to churches.

whether Paul was willing to go to Jerusalem for a full trial. Paul refused and instead exercised his rights as a Roman citizen to appeal to Caesar (25:1-12).

While waiting to send Paul on to Rome, King Agrippa and Bernice, his wife, visited Festus. While chatting about the job, Festus brought up the case of Paul. Agrippa's interest was peaked and he asked to hear Paul himself.

With great pomp, Agrippa and Bernice entered into the audience room the next day and Paul was granted permission to speak. Starting from the beginning of his life, Paul relayed to Agrippa not only his upbringing, but also his zeal in persecuting the church, his encounter with Jesus on the Damascus road, and the missionary efforts Paul undertook at the charge of God. Festus, who was listening as well, interrupted Paul, interjecting that Paul's great learning must have driven him insane. Paul responded that his sanity was intact, his experiences and narrative were quite reasonable, and that Agrippa was not without some knowledge already of what Paul was saying.

Paul then boldly asked King Agrippa, "King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do." Agrippa dodged the question and instead asked Paul, "Do you think in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?" Paul answered that he prayed for the King and others to come to Christ whether "short time or long."

Agrippa told Festus and Festus agreed that Paul had done absolutely nothing worthy of death. Festus said he could release Paul but for the fact Paul had already appealed to Caesar (25:13-26:32).

At some point, Paul was set to sail with his guards to Rome. Luke and others accompanied Paul on the trip. Luke provides great detail of the islands used as waypoints on the trip (27:1-8).

Winter was closing in when storms made boat travel too dangerous in the Mediterranean. Hoping to beat the foul weather, Paul's captors insisted on continuing the voyage on various vessels. Paul warned the centurion that storms would cause loss of the ship and cargo, but his counsel was not heeded. A gentle sailing wind brought the weather the centurion wanted and the boat put out from harbor. The gentle wind, however, did not last!

A huge storm caught the boat at sea, and for several weeks, the crew feared survival. They hurled everything they could overboard and even passed ropes around the boat in an effort to hold it together. The centurion started listening to Paul as Paul gave counsel during the storm. Before dawn one day, Paul told everyone to eat food (they had not eaten for some time as the storm tossed the boat around!). Paul assured them they would all survive the storm and reach land.

Finally, land was sighted, but the ship ran aground on a sandbar before reaching the land. The soldiers wanted to kill the prisoners to keep them from escaping, but the centurion intervened in order to spare Paul's life. The ship fell apart and those that could swim swam to the beach at Malta while those that could not swim floated in on wreckage from the boat.

Paul and others were treated well by those on Malta. They saw Paul bitten by a snake and, upon his surviving unharmed, believed him to be a God! Paul healed those sick on the island and ultimately left to sail on to Rome well provisioned by the locals (27:9-28:10).

Three months later, they set sail eventually arriving in Rome. While there, Paul had great liberty to teach not only to the Christians there, but also to the Jews as well. Luke ends his narrative, noting that Paul lived and taught for two years, preaching "boldly and without hindrance" (28:11-31). We are left without knowing the outcome of Paul's appeal from Acts. For the outcome, we need to glean through Paul's other letters and early church writings. More on that later!

III. POINTS FOR HOME

1. God has God's plans.
2. Working for God is the Greatest Joy!
3. Even the best need encouragement.
4. God is faithful.
5. Stand like steel.