

Paul's Journey to Rome

[PREPARATION]

✦ GETTING READY

Reflect on a time you followed Jesus into a scary situation. How did you know He was leading you? Why did you put your trust in Him? What happened as a result?

Read Acts 27–28.

Ask God to use these Scriptures to give you the passion and single-mindedness to make your life all about advancing the gospel, the way Paul's was.

[THIS WEEK AT A GLANCE]

✦ KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

Disciples of Jesus live on mission as His witnesses to the ends of the earth.

✦ THEOLOGY APPLIED

The ending of Acts brings us back to the theme laid out at the beginning, being Christ's witnesses to the ends of the earth. Paul went all the way to Rome, the center of the greatest empire in the world at the time. He would preach the gospel before Caesar himself. But the story ends before he got to speak to Caesar. It ends with a theologically interesting dichotomy. Paul's body was in chains, but he was preaching the gospel without hindrance. No matter what happened to his physical life or any of the disciples' lives, God's message would continue, even through their deaths. The story is not about our individual lives; it's about the mission of the church in the world. The kingdom of God is so much bigger than that. Each of our lives is but a single brick ("living stone") in the temple God is building, which is the church (1 Corinthians 3:10–17; 1 Peter 2:4–6). Our lives are not our own. Our mission, our purpose is to advance the gospel, build the kingdom, and grow the church.

✦ MEDITATE

"[Paul] welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance" (Acts 28:30b–31).

GETTING STARTED

+This section will introduce the lesson by identifying the main point of the passage and offering a preliminary application of it.

QUESTION *What would you say is the purpose of life as a Christian?*

QUESTION *How do you live it out? How can people see that purpose reflected in your life?*

In the final chapters of Acts, we see Paul's single-mindedness. His whole focus was to get to Rome to preach the gospel to Caesar. But he also preached the gospel at every point along the way. Paul's whole life was about advancing the gospel. His whole purpose was sharing Christ with the world. He rejoiced in his sufferings because they gave him greater opportunities to share the gospel. His arrest gave him opportunities to share the gospel with Felix and Drusilla, Festus, and Agrippa and Bernice. His shipwreck gave him the opportunity to share the gospel with the people of Malta, the prisoners, the sailors, and the soldiers with him on the ship. His imprisonment in Rome gave him the opportunity to share the gospel with the prison guards, the household of Ceasar, and many more in Rome. Paul rejoiced at these things because the gospel was preached. He didn't care about his own life or safety. For him, "to live is Christ, and to die is gain." The question for all of us is, is this how we live our lives? Do we live on mission for the gospel as our primary purpose in life?

✦ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+ In Acts 27–28, we see Paul leaving Caesarea, in Judea, to go to Rome to plead his case before Caesar. Agrippa and Festus agreed they would have let him go if he hadn't appealed to Caesar, but because he had, they were required to send him to Rome. But this was part of God's plan for Paul, as Jesus had told him in a vision in Acts 23:11. Jesus wanted him to share his testimony in Rome as he had in Jerusalem. In Acts 27, Paul and his friends (including Luke) set sail for Rome and experience a lot of danger at sea. An angel appeared to Paul and told him they would lose the ship, but all the people would live. They were shipwrecked on the island of Malta, where the locals receive them kindly. When Paul was bitten by a snake with no symptoms, they believed he was a god. Then Paul healed everyone who came to him. They stayed there for three months, through the winter, and then set sail for Rome. When Paul arrived, he met with the Jewish leaders and shared the gospel. Some accepted it, some did not. Paul said the message would go to the Gentiles, and they would believe. The story ends by summarizing Paul's two years in Rome, bringing us back to the theme of Acts, the spreading of the gospel. Paul proclaimed the kingdom

of God and taught about Jesus “with all boldness and without hindrance.”

1. *Danger at Sea*

2. *Miracles in Malta*

3. *The Gospel in Rome*

[GOING DEEPER]

+ This section will follow the points given above and look deeper into Acts 27-28.

1. *Danger at Sea*

+ READ ACTS 27

QUESTION *Why did the angel tell Paul their lives would be spared?*

QUESTION *Why did the soldiers want to kill the prisoners? Why did the centurion stop them?*

At the end of the last section, King Herod Agrippa II and the Roman governor Festus agreed they would have let Paul go if he hadn't appealed to Caesar, because there was no real evidence against him. He hadn't done anything wrong. But earlier, Paul had appealed to Caesar because Festus had threatened to send him back to Jerusalem to be tried before the Sanhedrin, and Paul knew that would be dangerous for him. They were plotting to kill him along the way, before he even got to the trial. Once he appealed to Caesar, Festus had no choice but to send him to Caesar. Agrippa couldn't actually do anything about Paul's verdict; he only listened to his testimony to help Festus write his letter to the emperor that accompanied Paul to Caesar.

So they sent Paul to Rome by boat with some other prisoners and a centurion named Julius, of the Augustan Cohort, which meant the cohort of the emperor. Augustus was not a name, but a title—"the revered one" or "the illustrious one." When Octavian became the first emperor, he took the name "Caesar Augustus." He was the emperor when Jesus was born. After him, every emperor adopted "Augustus" as part of their imperial title; it became almost synonymous with "emperor" like "Caesar" did. The emperor at the time of Paul's appeal was Nero, whose full title was Nero Claudius Ceasar Augustus Germanicus. A cohort was

a group of 600 soldiers, but not all of them went with the centurion on this journey. A total of 276 people were on the boat, including sailors, soldiers, and other prisoners, not just Paul (27:37). Luke was also on this journey; he used “we” throughout this story.

Luke described exactly where they went on their journey, which we could see on a map in any study Bible. Throughout the trip, they had difficult winds and had to keep sailing in the lee of different islands. The centurion had a lot of faith in Paul; he allowed him to go to his friends and be cared for when they landed at Sidon. Whether this was because the centurion himself trusted Paul or because Festus had told him that Paul was innocent, we don’t know. When they came to Myra in Lycia, they switched to a different ship. They continued slowly with great difficulty until they stopped at Fair Havens, near Lasea, on the southern coast of Crete. Fair Havens was exposed to the open sea, so it was not an ideal place to stop for the winter storm season. When Luke said “the Fast” was already over, he was referring to Yom Kippur, which falls in September/October. The captain wanted to continue to Pheonix, a larger and safer harbor that had more protection from the prevailing seasonal winds. Paul told them he perceived that journey would result in great loss, not only the cargo, but their very lives. But the centurion listened to the captain of the ship instead of Paul.

A heavy wind called a northeaster overcame them, and they struggled against it. They used supports to undergird the ship, lowered the gear, and started offloading cargo. An angel appeared to Paul and told him the Lord would protect their lives so Paul could testify before Caesar. God spoke to Paul in two different ways. The first time, Paul said, “I perceive ...” This was just a sense or feeling he had from the Lord. The second time, an angel appeared to Paul and spoke explicitly to him. God can speak to His people in a variety of ways, but those who are in communion with the Spirit know when God is speaking, whatever method He uses.

On the fourteenth night, about midnight, they thought they were getting close to land, so they took some depth measurements. When they got so close they were afraid they would run up on the rocks, they let down the anchors and prayed for day to come. Some of the sailors tried to escape in the lifeboat, but Paul told the centurion they would not be saved unless they all stayed in the boat. So, they cut away the lifeboats. What an act of faith!

As day was about dawn, Paul urged them to eat. They hadn’t eaten for fourteen days; they needed strength. Paul promised that not a hair on their heads would be harmed. Then he took the bread, gave thanks to God, and broke it. This is the same language used in the feeding of the 5,000, the 4,000, and the Last Supper. They ate until they were full—all 276 of them—and there was still wheat leftover, also similar to those miraculous feedings. They threw the rest overboard to lighten the ship. When day broke, they set sail for the shore but hit a reef. The bow was stuck, and the stern was being broken up by the waves. The soldiers wanted to kill the prisoners so they wouldn’t escape, but the centurion stopped them

to save Paul. Those who could swim swam to shore and those who couldn't floated on parts of the ship, so they all were saved.

This story shows God's supernatural protection of Paul so he could fulfill his mission of sharing the gospel with Ceasar. It also shows the faith of the centurion—at least in Paul, if not in Jesus. We don't know if he ever put his faith in Christ, but he certainly trusted Paul. God again used a Gentile military leader, like He did Cornelius and the tribune in Jerusalem, to protect His people and accomplish His will. Every time a centurion appears in Acts, they are portrayed as disciplined, fair, and often sympathetic to the apostles and the gospel.

The theological lesson is found in Paul's words to the crew in verse 21, "You should have listened to me." Not because Paul was wiser than they were about boats and weather patterns, but because he was speaking for God. His advice had been contrary to logic—don't go to the safer harbor. Yet it turned out the "safe" harbor wasn't safe because it wasn't where God told them to go. The safest place to be is in God's will, even if it may seem dangerous. Paul was a prisoner on this ship; it's not surprising that the captain didn't listen to his contrary-to-logic advice about where to go. But when he proved to be right, they started listening to him. And following Paul's advice kept their whole ship alive, not just Paul.

QUESTION *What does it tell us about God that He kept all the people on the ship—prisoners, soldiers, centurions—alive?*

QUESTION *In what ways did God speak to Paul in this story? How did Paul know where God was leading them?*

APPLICATION POINT / This story shows us that the safest place to be is in God's will. But it wasn't without any danger. They had to endure storms, not eating for two weeks, a shipwreck, and swimming/floating to shore! Yet God sustained them through the storms. God doesn't promise that we won't have any suffering, danger, or struggle. He promises He will work it out for our good in the end. He doesn't promise to keep us *from* the storms; He promises He will sustain us *through* the storms.

QUESTION *Reflect on times God has sustained you through a storm. How did God show you where to go? How did He keep you safe through the storm? How did He use the storm in your life, to teach you and/or grow you closer to Him?*

QUESTION *What does it look like to walk in faith, following God even when it may seem illogical or even dangerous? How can we know where God is calling us to go?*

2. *Miracles in Malta*

✚ READ ACTS 28:1-10

QUESTION *Why did the locals think Paul was a murderer at first? What changed their minds?*

QUESTION *Why might Paul being shipwrecked have been part of God's plan?*

Paul and the other 275 people on board were shipwrecked on Malta. Malta was a tiny island in the middle of the Mediterranean, just south of Sicily. At this time, it was under Roman control, and its inhabitants were bore a mix of Phoenician, Greek, and Roman influences. It was strategically located along the ancient trade routes between the eastern and western Mediterranean. The Maltese people were known for their seafaring skills and strategic position in maritime trade routes. They were also known for honey production (the name Malta is derived from the Greek word for honey).

When the shipwreck survivors first arrived, the Maltese people showed them “unusual kindness.” They kindled a fire and welcomed them all, regardless of their background—prisoners, soldiers, whatever. When Paul was gathering sticks for the fire, a viper bit him, fastening onto his hand. When the Maltese people saw it, they took it as a sign that he was a murderer, and the goddess Justice was punishing him. Dike or Dicaeosyne was the Greek goddess of justice and the spirit of moral order and fair judgment. She was depicted as a young, slender woman carrying a balance scale, wearing a laurel wreath. The modern American legal system uses this same imagery of Lady Justice in many courthouses, including the Supreme Court.

The Maltese people thought the snake meant Lady Justice was punishing Paul with death, but then he shook the snake off into the fire and nothing happened. They waited for him to swell up or drop dead, but he didn't. Then they believed he was a god. This story is reminiscent of the story of the plague of fiery serpents in the wilderness, when God healed His people from the venomous snakes when they looked to the bronze serpent in faith (Numbers 21:4–9). God has the power over venomous snakes; this proved God was with Paul.

After Paul showed this favor with God, the chief of the island, named Publius, offered his hospitality for Paul and his friends to stay with him for three days. Paul healed Publius's father, who was sick with fever and dysentery. Then the rest of those on the island who had diseases also came and were cured. They stayed there for three months, through the winter, and when they set sail, the people of Malta made sure they had everything they needed for the journey.

The book of Acts doesn't explicitly tell us whether these people accepted the gospel or not, but history tells us Paul's three-month stay on Malta was the beginning of the church there. Archaeological finds like catacombs, inscriptions, and Christian symbols like the fish and anchor suggest that Christianity spread on Malta within the first centuries. Christianity was suppressed by Arab rule in 870–1091, but it didn't disappear. In 1091, when the Normans conquered Malta, Christianity was restored as the island's dominant faith. Today Malta, more than 90 percent Catholic, is one of the most Catholic countries in the world. St. Paul is deeply revered, and the Feast of St. Paul's Shipwreck (February 10) is a national holiday. And it all began with an "accidental" shipwreck on a random tiny island. Except it wasn't an accident, and it wasn't random. This shipwreck was part of God's plan all along.

QUESTION *What does it tell us about God and His plans and purposes that this "accident" was used to bring many people on an isolated island to faith in Jesus?*

QUESTION *What does it tell us about God that He had a plan for the people of this tiny island in the middle of nowhere?*

APPLICATION POINT / If Paul hadn't been shipwrecked on this island, would these people in this remote area have ever heard about Jesus? This story shows us that what we may see as a bad thing, like a shipwreck, may be part of God's good plan to rescue the world. We see the same in Joseph's life in Genesis. His pain and suffering were part of God's bigger plan to rescue not only his family but the whole world from the famine. There are so many examples in Scripture of God using "bad" things to accomplish His good purposes. This story also shows us that God cares about every life on this planet. This was a tiny island in the middle of nowhere with a small population of people the rest of the world didn't even know

existed. Yet God had a plan for their salvation. He didn't forget about anyone. God doesn't leave anyone behind. God's desire is that every person on earth would be saved and come to knowledge of the truth (1 Timothy 2:4). If we're going through a "shipwreck" situation in our lives, we need to ask ourselves how God might be using this to bring other people close to Him. How might He use this to share the gospel? To bring people to know Him? That's what really matters. If that happens, it's worth any suffering or pain we endure.

QUESTION *Share any time you've been through suffering or struggle, but it led to the gospel being preached or someone coming to know Jesus. Was it worth the suffering?*

QUESTION *When we are going through hard times, how can we look for what God is doing in us and through us? How can we see His plan and His purposes in our suffering?*

3. *The Gospel in Rome*

✚ **READ ACTS 28:11-31**

QUESTION *Why did Paul call together the Jewish leaders when he got to Rome?*

QUESTION *Why did he say the Holy Spirit, through Isaiah, was right about them?*

When Paul and his friends set sail from Malta, they went on a ship with "the twin gods" as figureheads. Castor and Pollux, the twin sons of Zeus, were the patron gods of sailors. This created an intentional contrast. The Greek sailors trusted in Castor and Pollux for protection in the dangerous open sea, but it was the God of Israel who had protected Paul, the prisoners, and the crew in the storm and shipwreck.

They stopped at several places on the way. When they finally hit land at Puteoli, they found "brothers" (meaning other Christians) and stayed with them for seven days before heading northward to Rome. This terminology emphasizes the intimate nature of the early church. Believers were like extended family, even if they were from different places, even if they had just met. Luke wrote that the believers in Rome had heard Paul was coming and came to meet them and encourage them along the way. Paul was traveling from Puteoli to Rome along the Appian Way, Rome's first great highway, which ran from Rome to Capua and was used to move armies, officials, and goods quickly across southern Italy.

Along the Appian Way, the Forum of Appius was about forty miles from Rome, and the Three Taverns was about thirty miles, both about a day's journey if you traveled fast. The willingness of the believers to travel such a distance highlights their eagerness to support and welcome Paul. Paul thanked God for them and "took courage" from their presence; it gave him the strength to continue his mission. The presence of the body of Christ surrounding him at this point in the journey reminds us that God never abandons His servants but equips them and empowers them to carry out His mission.

When he came into Rome, Paul was allowed to stay in his own rented home, on house arrest, with a soldier guarding him. This meant they really did not see him as a threat or a flight risk. But it also meant he had to provide for all his physical needs—food, shelter, etc.—while awaiting trial. For two years, this was no small expense. Thankfully, he had the support of several churches, one of which was in Philippi. He wrote the biblical letter to the Philippians while he was on house arrest in Rome, thanking them for sending financial aid and telling them he rejoiced for this time in prison because he was able to spread the gospel to even more people through it. Advancing the gospel was the only thing that mattered. Not his life or his safety, just the gospel (Philippians 1).

Three days after Paul arrived at Rome, he called together the local Jewish leaders and told them he had done nothing against "our people" or the customs of "our fathers," being sure to identify himself with them, yet he had been arrested in Jerusalem. The Roman officials had found him innocent and wanted to set him free, but because the Jews objected, he had appealed to Caesar. This is why he asked to speak with them; it was because of "the hope of Israel" that he was in chains. He identified with them as a fellow Jew and then pointed to Jesus as the hope of Israel, the Messiah their Scriptures prophesied.

The Jewish leaders said they had not heard anything from Judea about Paul. This is relatively surprising, considering how upset the Jews in Jerusalem were. You would think they would have reached out to the Jews in Rome to warn them about Paul, but they hadn't. They had heard nothing about him, but they had heard about the Way, and not good things, but that everywhere Jews spoke against it. But they said they wanted to hear Paul's views, so they set up a meeting, and many more of them came to hear. Paul expounded the Scriptures to them all day, morning to evening, testifying about the kingdom of God and trying to convince them from their own Scriptures, the law and the prophets, not only that Jesus was their promised Messiah but about His death and resurrection and the gospel of salvation by grace through faith.

Some were convinced; others weren't. Paul quoted the same prophecy from Isaiah that Jesus had quoted to the Jews of His day, that they would see but not understand because their hearts had grown dull. If they would see and hear and understand with their hearts and turn and repent, God would heal them. But many of their hearts were hardened. They would not see. But the message had gone out to the Gentiles, and they would listen. God's people were not one particular nationality; they were every person from any nation on earth who would turn to Him in faith. This is how the book of Acts ends. With this reminder

that God's message was always for the whole world—for anyone who would listen, believe, repent, and turn to Jesus in faith. These final chapters show the gospel moving from Jerusalem to Rome, the center of the largest empire on earth at the time. Luke was signaling that God's mission continues outward to all nations. God desires everyone, Jew and Gentile alike, to hear the good news.

The last two sentences of Acts tell us Paul lived in Rome for two years at his own expense. He was allowed any visitors, and he welcomed all who came to see him. We learn from Philippians that he witnessed to the whole palace guard and many others throughout Rome, including Caesar's household (Philippians 1:13; 4:22). Acts doesn't tell us about Paul appearing before Nero, but ancient historians like Eusebius said he defended himself successfully before Nero, was released, and embarked on new missionary journeys, making it all the way to Spain before he came to Rome a second time, where he was martyred under Nero. Instead, Acts ends with Paul on house arrest, but with a positive statement pointing us back to the theme of the book, which is being Christ's witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).

The last verse says even though Paul was on house arrest, he proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about Jesus with all boldness and without hindrance. This contrast was intentional and poignant. His body may have been in chains, but his message had no hindrance. In fact, Paul said in Philippians that his chains helped advance the gospel. Because of his chains, he was able to reach people he never would have met, like the palace guard and Caesar's household. Because of his chains, others were inspired to preach with boldness. God uses our weaknesses for His glory. Paul was in chains, yet from that place of limitation, God used him to preach, teach, and write letters that still impact the world today.

The ending of Acts is intentionally open ended, stopping before the ending of Paul's story to hint at the fact that even when Paul was dead and gone, the message and the mission would go on. These final words show us God's mission is unstoppable. Chains, opposition, government restrictions, shipwreck—nothing can stop God's Word. God is sovereign over all things, and His purposes will be fulfilled.

QUESTION *How did God use Paul's imprisonment to advance the gospel? What does it tell us about Paul that he rejoiced in his imprisonment?*

QUESTION *Reflect on the whole story of Acts. How did the Holy Spirit work through suffering, struggle, and persecution to advance the gospel? What does this tell us about how God works in our lives?*

APPLICATION POINT / Acts ends without a resolution. Paul's trial isn't recorded, nor is his death. Instead, the last note is about the gospel going forward. The ending of Acts isn't a conclusion but a continuation. It's as if Luke was inviting the reader to step into the story. The mission of God didn't stop with Paul. It continues beyond the pages of Scripture, throughout church history, with us today. How will we participate in the work of God in the world? How will we fulfill His mission? How will we advance the gospel?

QUESTION *How has God used hard times in your life to create opportunities for you to share the gospel that you wouldn't have otherwise had? How have your sufferings affected your testimony?*

QUESTION *From beginning to end, this book is about Jesus's disciples being His witnesses, sharing the gospel all over the world. What does this tell us about what it means to be a Christian? How does this compare to the way most people in our culture would describe Christians?*

QUESTION *How will you continue the mission of the church as a disciple of Jesus? How can you find the passion and total commitment Paul had for advancing the gospel?*

[NEXT STEPS]

The ending of Acts shows Paul as single-minded, completely focused on advancing the gospel. He completely trusted in God, following Him into dangerous situations, to fulfill his mission. This week, re-read the book of Acts, ideally in one sitting (give yourself enough time). Pray to be inspired by the acts of the apostles in this book and ask God to show you how you can carry on their mission in your life today.

[PRAY]

+Pray for God to give you the heart Paul had for the mission; it was everything to him, the entire purpose of his life. Read Philippians 1, Paul's prayer and words to the Philippians about his imprisonment and then write your own prayer along the same lines, asking for the courage to share the gospel and rejoicing at the opportunities God has given you to share the gospel, even if they occurred in the midst of personal suffering.