

# Gospel Listening

Acts 28:1-31 on January 30, 2022

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*Please read Acts 28:1-31 before going further in this transcript.*

Have you ever struggled to get someone to listen to what you're trying to tell them? Anyone? Or is it just me? Maybe parents trying to get your young children to listen? Or maybe parents trying to get your teenagers to listen? Or maybe, you're the teenager, trying to get your parents to listen, while they're watching TV? Or while they're talking on their cell phone, while they're driving, the wrong way down the road?<sup>1</sup> We find a more serious example of people refusing to listen in Acts 28:27: "For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them." When human hearts refuse to listen to the gospel, it's because those hearts have become calloused. We refuse to listen to the message about Jesus. And sadly, this hardheartedness, keeps us from the spiritual life that we need; it keeps us from God's salvation which heals our sin-sickness.

At last, we come to the final chapter of Acts! This is week 47 of 48. We will have one more sermon on Acts. Next week we're going to do a final overview, and summarize together some of the main themes that we've encountered over the past year or more. For today though, we're going to zero in on Acts 28. It begins with Paul and his shipmates getting safely to shore on the Island of Malta. I like how the *ESV* translates verse 1, "after we were brought safely through." God had indeed brought Paul and the others safely through a terrible storm and an awful shipwreck. If you missed Pastor Eric's sermon last week from Acts 27, it's available on our website.<sup>2</sup> Paul then gets bit by a snake which causes all kinds of drama for the islanders. At first, they're convinced that Paul must be a murderer, but then when he doesn't die from the snake bite, they're convinced that he must be a god.<sup>3</sup> Acts 28:5 says, "But Paul shook the snake off into the fire and suffered no ill effects."<sup>4</sup> Honestly, after all that Paul has suffered up to this point, do we really think a little snake is going to bother him!? (Paul's not worried in the least; he doesn't even break a sweat!) Indeed, what an irony it would have been for Paul to survive such a dreadful storm at sea and then die from a little snake bite!<sup>5</sup> However, there is no irony at work here, and there is no "murderer's fate."<sup>6</sup> Paul has

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<sup>1</sup> Check out this silly video clip. It gives us a lighthearted illustration of how difficult it can be to get someone to listen: "**Linda Honey, listen to me!**" YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aFYsJYPye94> (~2:35 min.) **We humans can be a lot like this little 3-year-old. We just want our cupcakes!** We don't want to listen to a loving authority who tells us "we can't have cupcakes for dinner."

<sup>2</sup> <https://efcbemidji.org/sermon/sailing-on-the-promises-of-god/>

<sup>3</sup> Paul and Barnabas were also misunderstood to be gods back in Acts 14:11-12. Peter needed to clarify a somewhat similar misunderstanding in Acts 10:25-26.

<sup>4</sup> The fire felt good because it was raining and cold, likely "It was the end of October or the beginning of November." *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 1881 footnote on Acts 28:2.

<sup>5</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, pp. 742-743.

<sup>6</sup> "This is the personification of justice as a goddess, a reference to fate directing events.... She was seen as the daughter of Zeus and Themis." Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 743.

been innocent all along. God's will, was for Paul to preach the gospel in Rome, so neither a storm, nor a snake, was going to hinder him.

God then opens up an opportunity for Paul to have a healing ministry on the island. This demonstrates his godly character: "Paul the prisoner is still a blessing to those around him, even [though he is being] held unjustly."<sup>7</sup> (Probably laying hands on people to heal them with chains around his wrists.) We should also recognize that God continues to provide a way for Paul to find favor, with the people around him. Acts 28:10 says, "They honored us in many ways; and when we were ready to sail, they furnished us with the supplies we needed." (In this sense, God is providing for Paul's needs, as he continues to preach the gospel wherever he goes.) Acts 28:11 then goes on, "After three months we put out to sea in a ship that had wintered in the island—it was an Alexandrian ship with the figurehead of the twin gods Castor and Pollux." So, having learned their lesson from last time, this time they wait a few months for better weather, before setting sail again.<sup>8</sup><sup>9</sup> Now, we can't help but think, that it must have been a bit strange, getting back on a ship again for the 1<sup>st</sup> time since their terrible shipwreck. Even for the most seasoned sailors, there must have been a least a small twinge of hesitation. And since their ship had been totally destroyed, they needed a new one. This one sported the twin gods, Castor and Pollux, "the two 'sons of Zeus' [who were considered to be]...the guardian deities of sailors."<sup>10</sup> "[Castor and Pollux] were seen as protectors of good fortune on the seas."<sup>11</sup> However, I wonder which brought the sailors more reassurance, the twin gods Castor and Pollux, or the one God whom Paul served? After all, they'd recently experienced firsthand how God had worked in incredible ways in Paul's life. It wouldn't be surprising if many of them were thinking, "hey, as long as this guy Paul is on the ship, who needs the sons of Zeus!?"<sup>12</sup>

Well, they travel through some various ports, and then verse 14 has this great phrase, "And so we came to Rome." Woo who! Finally! Right? Verse 16 clarifies that "Paul was allowed to live by himself, with a soldier to guard him." So Paul is under a rather mild form of house arrest.<sup>13</sup> Paul doesn't waste much time. Acts 28:17 tells us, "Three days later he called together the local Jewish leaders. When they had assembled, Paul said to them: "My brothers, although I have done nothing against our people or against the customs of our ancestors, I was arrested in Jerusalem and handed over to the Romans."<sup>14</sup> So Paul makes it his first priority to meet with his fellow Jews and explain what's been going on. But he doesn't simply explain why he's in chains and give his

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<sup>7</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 744.

<sup>8</sup> "They had to remain here until the sailing season opened in late February or early March." *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 1881 footnote on Acts 28:11.

<sup>9</sup> See Acts 27:9-15.

<sup>10</sup> *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 1881 footnote on Acts 28:11.

<sup>11</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 745.

<sup>12</sup> In fact, with Paul on the same boat as them, some of these sailors may have felt just about invincible. And to some degree, they were.

<sup>13</sup> Normally there would have been 2 guards, which further illustrates that Paul is trusted and not considered either a threat nor a flight risk. See Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, top of p. 747.

<sup>14</sup> "The decree of the Emperor Claudius (see Acts 18:2...) had been allowed to lapse, and Jews had returned to Rome with their leaders." *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 1882 footnote on Acts 28:17.

defense regarding the false charges against him, he moves right to his primary mission. In Acts 28:20 Paul says, "...It is because of the hope of Israel that I am bound with this chain." This "hope of Israel" is the same gospel witness that Paul declared back in Acts 26 before Governor Festus and King Agrippa.<sup>15</sup> Now, as it turns out, the Jews in Rome hadn't heard anything about Paul's situation, either good or bad. So, they tell Paul in Acts 28:22, "But we want to hear what your views are, for we know that people everywhere are talking against this sect." By "sect"<sup>16</sup> they're referring here to Christianity. So even though these Jews in Rome hadn't heard anything negative about Paul himself, they had heard people speak negatively about Christianity.<sup>17 18</sup> So clearly there is potential here for some strong resistance, and Paul realizes that he faces an uphill battle, as he prepares to tell these listeners about Jesus.<sup>19</sup> However, despite these negative reports about Christianity, Paul boldly declares the gospel. In fact, he talks all day long!

Acts 28:23-24 says that, "...He witnessed to them from morning till evening, explaining about the kingdom of God, and from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets he tried to persuade them about Jesus. 24 Some were convinced by what he said, but others would not believe." Just as Paul had tried to persuade King Agrippa back in Caesarea, Paul now tries to persuade the Jews in Rome. THIS was the reason that God had brought him to Rome: to tell people about Jesus. Paul gets pretty direct with those who refuse to listen. In fact, he takes on more of a prophetic role here, as he quotes the Old Testament prophet Isaiah.<sup>20</sup> Acts 28:26-27 records the words of Isaiah, "Go to this people and say, 'You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.' 27 For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.'" Some people just don't want to listen; they refuse to hear and see God's truth. This same passage from Isaiah was also "quoted by Jesus...to make a similar point."<sup>21</sup> The Jews rejection of Jesus and the gospel, is an important theme all throughout Acts.<sup>22 23</sup> Many of their hearts had become calloused to God's Word.

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<sup>15</sup> See Acts 26:6 and its surrounding context.

<sup>16</sup> αἵρεσις "(1) a group that holds tenets distinctive to it, sect, party, school, faction." (Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (3rd ed., p. 27). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.)

<sup>17</sup> "The Jews in Rome were well aware of the dispute over whether Jesus was the Messiah. They wanted to hear Paul's presentation, and he was eager to present it before the arrival of adverse opinions from the Jews leaders of Jerusalem." *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 1882 footnote on Acts 28:22.

<sup>18</sup> This may explain, at least in part, why Paul's ship had been driven west by the terrible storm, to speed his arrival in Rome, ahead of his opponents? Also see Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 753.

<sup>19</sup> Luke 2:34 predicted as much regarding Jesus: "Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: "This child is destined to cause the fallings and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken **against**."

<sup>20</sup> In other words, in Acts 28, "Paul is like Isaiah, and the present Jewish community is like the ancient nation." Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, bottom of p. 755.

<sup>21</sup> See Matthew 13:14-15 and Luke 8:10.

<sup>22</sup> *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 1882 footnote on Acts 28:26-27.

<sup>23</sup> The Jews continue to display a steady pattern of stubborn refusal to accept God's message, not just in Paul's day, but all throughout their history, as evidenced by these words of Isaiah, written some 700 years earlier. See Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, top of p. 750.

In Acts 28:28, Paul delivers his closing salvo, “Therefore I want you to know that God’s salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and THEY will listen!” It’s as though Paul makes one last ditch effort to make these Jews jealous, as they are walking out the door. He’s warning them, but he’s also prodding them and baiting them as they walk out the door.<sup>24</sup> “You’re letting the Gentiles inherit the salvation that was also intended for you!” Now, we shouldn’t conclude from verse 28, that God has now written off the Jews entirely, from this point forward in history. On the contrary, “God continues to preach to rebellious Israel. Everything we know about Paul tells us that...[he] continues to hold out hope for ethnic Israel and its response to Jesus.”<sup>25 26 27</sup> (And so should we.)

And now, we come to the final 2 verses of the book of Acts. Acts 28:30-31 tell us, “For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. 31 He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ—with all boldness and without hindrance!” So, once again, Paul has to wait, for yet another 2 years. And actually, we’re never told whether his accusers eventually showed up in Rome or not. For some reason, Luke doesn’t tell us, if Paul actually appeared before Caesar or not.<sup>28 29 30</sup> Many Bible scholars have hypothesized about what happened to Paul next, after Acts 28. However, this is mostly educated guesswork. Luke simply doesn’t record some of the details that we’d really like to know. Apparently, these details aren’t all that important to Luke; instead, he wants to focus on something else at the conclusion of Acts:<sup>31 32</sup> One author notes: “Luke chose

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<sup>24</sup> “Here Paul appears to be baiting Israel’s people with this prophetic warning in the hope of making them jealous (Romans 11:11-12, 25-32) or prodding them not to be disobedient to God.” Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, top of p. 756.

<sup>25</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 756.

<sup>26</sup> The fact is, all throughout the book of Acts, the Jews are included in the gospel invitation, and “even in the face of consistent rejection.... Paul continues to [hold out] hope for the Jewish nation.” Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 756.

<sup>27</sup> Paul loves his fellow Jews; he views them “as brothers who have lost their way.” Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 759.

<sup>28</sup> Scholars list multiple reasons why they believe Paul was eventually released from prison: 1. **Acts stops abruptly.** 2. **Paul wrote to churches expecting to visit them**, so he must have anticipated an upcoming release. 3. **Some details in some of Paul’s New Testament letters don’t fit into Acts’ historical setting.** In other words, there are indications that he again revisited Asia Minor, etc. 4. **There are indications that Paul went to Spain** after his time in Rome. But even if he didn’t go to Spain, these indications suggest that he may have had the opportunity to do so. (See *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 1882 footnote on Acts 28:30.)

<sup>29</sup> The conclusion of the book of Acts leaves out at least 2 things we might have expected: (See discussion by Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, top of pp. 749-750.) 1. The outcome of Paul’s appeal to Caesar. 2. Paul’s meeting with the church in Rome. (See Romans 1:11-13, especially verse 13 “among the other GENTILES.”) The lack of these items makes it clear that Luke, the author of Acts, either just ran out of pen and paper, or, more likely, he had a different crescendo in mind for his readers. Therefore, let’s make sure we pay attention to Luke’s closing 2 points: 1. Paul continued trying to persuade the Jews about Jesus (verse 23). 2. Paul continued to proclaim Jesus boldly (verse 31).

<sup>30</sup> So did Paul ever appear before Caesar? One scholar suggests that “He first lived under house arrest and then, after a period of freedom, as a condemned prisoner (perhaps in the Mamertine dungeon....).... According to tradition, he was executed...outside Rome in AD 68.” *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 1883 synopsis, “Rome in the time of Paul.”

<sup>31</sup> “Despite being under house arrest, Paul [keeps on] preaching and teaching in Rome, the capital...of the Roman Empire—“with all boldness and without hindrance.” *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 1882 footnote on Acts 28:31.

to end his book here, because his point was the arrival of the [gospel] to the highest levels of Rome. The book's ending is open-ended with respect to the future of the Jewish nation because the church is still preaching the word to whoever will hear it."<sup>33</sup> You see, the focus of Acts' conclusion is not the biography of Paul's life, nor is it to inform us of Paul's fate.<sup>34</sup> The resounding crescendo of the book of Acts is the continuing advance of the gospel!<sup>35</sup> Despite some hardhearted responses to the gospel message, Paul kept on. Paul kept proclaiming Jesus boldly.<sup>36</sup> (And so should we!)

Paul preaches with boldness, but he also preaches without something. Acts 28:31 concludes with 2 words: "[Paul] proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ—with all boldness and without hindrance!" However, I think someone could make a fairly compelling argument, that Paul was not without hindrance. After all, according to verse 16, Paul was being guarded by a soldier, under house arrest. This sure seems like it would be a bit of a hindrance, at least in his ability to move around the city, or to go anywhere else.<sup>37</sup> Nonetheless, Luke says that Paul proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about Jesus, without hindrance.

The fact is, all throughout our journey through Acts, Luke has recorded potential hindrances to the proclamation of the gospel. Can you remember some of them?<sup>38</sup> There were...

**1) Persecution hindrances.** Early on, Steven was stoned to death. People, both men and women, were dragged from their homes and thrown into prison. And yet, this persecution just poured fuel on the fire of the gospel's spread. Later on, Paul faced death threats, murderous plots, poisonous vipers, all of which threatened to hinder the proclamation of the gospel. There were...

**2) Geographic hindrances.** The gospel spread well outside the confines of Jerusalem. From south to north, from east to west. On foot, on horseback, in boats and ships. Traversing thousands of miles over land and sea, through all kinds of different weather that threatened God's messengers. Riots and uproars in various cities, sometimes running with the gospel message from one city to the next. There were...

**3) Social/ethnic hindrances.** The gospel spread from Jew to Gentile, from religious to irreligious, from commoners to Governors/Kings, to small/great alike. The Hellenistic Jews had to work things out with the Hebraic Jews when their widows weren't getting their daily distribution of food. There were...

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<sup>32</sup> "Simply put, Luke's story is that the gospel reaches Rome...God sovereignly and powerfully brings the word to the capital of the world on a long and arduous journey from Jerusalem." Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 750.

<sup>33</sup> Citing Witherington, Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 758.

<sup>34</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, top of p. 750.

<sup>35</sup> This is the title of next week's final sermon from this series.

<sup>36</sup> "Paul suffered well. He kept the faith and continued to serve, living out his call." Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 759.

<sup>37</sup> In fact, verse 30 makes it clear that Paul welcomed people who CAME to see him. In other words, he himself wasn't able to GO out into the community, the community had to come to him.

<sup>38</sup> See Patrick Schreiner, *Why Does the Book of Acts End So Abruptly?* January 8, 2022.

<https://www.crossway.org/articles/why-does-the-book-of-acts-end-so-abruptly/>

**4) Legal hindrances.** Multiple court cases in front of both the Jewish Sanhedrin and the Roman courts. Multiple threats of punishment, multiple imprisonments, multiple beatings and being chained up. Yet, despite all of this, we know of at least one jailer and his family who came to faith, because the gospel was going forth without hindrance! There were...

**5) Theological hindrances.** > Church Councils debated whether the Gentile believers needed to be circumcised, and what to do about eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols.<sup>39</sup> > There were concerns raised by Jewish believers, over whether Paul continued to honor his Jewish heritage. And whether or not he even should. So Paul got a haircut and fulfilled his vow and kept on proclaiming the gospel! > Compelling arguments were laid out from the Old Testament Scriptures, which pointed to Jesus as God's promised Messiah, "the hope of Israel."

So, did the gospel message *really* face any hindrances? On the one hand, yes, absolutely, you bet it did! (We just listed a bunch!) On the other hand, no, not really. These may seem to be hindrances, but they didn't hinder anything!<sup>40</sup> The gospel has been unstoppable from day one, from the day that Jesus told His disciples to "get ready, because the gift of the Holy Spirit is coming!" All of this begs the question: What's hindering you and me from proclaiming the gospel? If Paul was truly able to share "without hindrance," then certainly we Christians living in America are. Of all the people who've lived on this planet throughout human history, you and I, have as much freedom as we could ever ask for, to share about Jesus without hindrance. So what's *really* keeping us from boldly proclaiming the gospel? One author writes: "This abrupt but victorious ending compels readers to ask about their own role in this narrative.... it is an encouragement to press on in the mission.... God is doing a work in the world that the powers of darkness marvel at, and the world will both oppose and be astonished at. Though there will be setbacks...God's purposes will not be stopped because God has pledged himself to this work. He has put his name behind it.... God is building his church. Therefore, the church must...speak of salvation in Jesus's name, and witness to the ends of the earth."<sup>41</sup> Another author summarizes Acts this way: "God is the hero of Acts, and the plot line, is how he reveals his word through Jesus, AND a faithful church. God will make sure it happens, and so will a faithful church."<sup>42</sup>

Romans 10:14-15 asks us a series of penetrating questions: "How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written: "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" Brothers and Sisters in Christ, these verses

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<sup>39</sup> There was also a disagreement over whether it was wise to bring John Mark along again. See Acts 15:36-41.

<sup>40</sup> Despite all of the many obstacles we see throughout the book of Acts, it ends with the gospel going forth without hindrance. Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 760.

<sup>41</sup> Patrick Schreiner, *Why Does the Book of Acts End So Abruptly?* January 8, 2022.

<https://www.crossway.org/articles/why-does-the-book-of-acts-end-so-abruptly/>

<sup>42</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 760.

aren't written just for pastors and missionaries. These verses are directed to every "fully devoted follower of Jesus." People in Bemidji can't hear without someone preaching to them. Yes, some of them will come into this building, but many will not. So we have a responsibility in our community, in our workplaces, at our schools, and so on. Wherever God has placed us, we are called to proclaim Jesus, "with all boldness and WITHOUT hindrance!"