



**Adult Sunday School Lesson Summary for August 29, 2010
Released on Wednesday, August 25, 2010**

"Upheld by God"

Lesson Text: Acts 28:16–25a, 28–31

Background Scripture: Acts 28; Philippians 4:15–23

Devotional Reading: Acts 9:23–30

Acts 28:16–25a, 28–31

16 And when we came to Rome, the centurion delivered the prisoners to the captain of the guard: but Paul was suffered to dwell by himself with a soldier that kept him.

17 And it came to pass, that after three days Paul called the chief of the Jews together: and when they were come together, he said unto them, Men and brethren, though I have committed nothing against the people, or customs of our fathers, yet was I delivered prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans:

18 Who, when they had examined me, would have let me go, because there was no cause of death in me.

19 But when the Jews spake against it, I was constrained to appeal unto Caesar; not that I had ought to accuse my nation of.

20 For this cause therefore have I called for you, to see you, and to speak with you: because that for the hope of Israel I am bound with this chain.

21 And they said unto him, We neither received letters out of Judea concerning thee, neither any of the brethren that came showed or spake any harm of thee.

22 But we desire to hear of thee what thou thinkest: for as concerning this sect, we know that every where it is spoken against.

23 And when they had appointed him a day, there came many to him into his lodging; to whom he expounded and testified the kingdom of God, persuading them concerning Jesus, both out of the law of Moses, and out of the prophets, from morning till evening.

24 And some believed the things which were spoken, and some believed not.

25a And when they agreed not among themselves, they departed, after that Paul had spoken one word.

....

28 Be it known therefore unto you, that the salvation of God is sent unto the Gentiles, and that they will hear it.

29 And when he had said these words, the Jews departed, and had great reasoning among themselves.

30 And Paul dwelt two whole years in his own hired house, and received all that came in unto him,

31 Preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching those things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ, with all confidence, no man forbidding him.

LESSON AIM

Facts: to see what happened to Paul after arriving in Rome and what God accomplished through him there even as a prisoner.

Principle: to realize that a servant of God should be a faithful witness wherever he goes.

Application: to urge believers to trust the Lord to care for them in all types of situations.

INTRODUCTION

Why Did the Jews Reject Jesus?

After the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, condemned Jesus to be executed, he commissioned that a sign be placed on Jesus' cross. The sign—written in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin—identified Jesus as the "King of the Jews." All four Gospels tell of the sign, but John's Gospel includes this unique detail: the Jewish leaders were offended and objected to Pilate. They wanted no part of any sort of legitimate recognition of Jesus (John 19:19–22).

This little story is consistent with the general pattern portrayed in the New Testament. For the most part, the Jewish people of Paul's day were unreceptive to Paul's claims that Jesus was the prophesied Messiah, the heir of David. Those Jews who accepted the claims of the early Christian evangelists such as Paul—like many who accepted Jesus from His own teaching—often were driven from the synagogue and cut off from the Jewish community. (See John 9:22.) Why?

There is no clear answer to this. We can say that faith is an individual decision and that each Jewish person in the ancient world made a personal choice concerning Jesus. This is true, but it does not fully explain the widespread and violent opposition to the Christian message, particularly by Jewish leaders in various locations. After Paul's final, fateful confrontation with the temple leaders in Jerusalem, they characterized him as a "pestilent fellow" who was causing trouble among Jews all over the world (Acts 24:5). This animosity erupted with such force on one occasion that the governing Romans had to use military force to rescue Paul from his imminent death at the hands of a Jewish mob (Acts 21:31–36).

This never caused Paul to reject his people. He was a Jew until the day he died. He longed for the salvation of his Jewish brothers and sisters (Romans 9:2, 3). He took no pleasure in Jewish unbelief. He spoke with great anguish when he told King Agrippa that he was "accused" of betrayal by the Jews, when he was simply proclaiming the fulfillment of Jewish hopes and prophecy (Acts 26:7). Elsewhere, Paul looked at the unbelief of the Jewish nation as an opportunity for Gentiles to become grafted into the people of God (Romans 11:17). Even in this, Paul held out the hope that the Jews would be grafted back in at a later date (Romans 11:23).

In many ways, the book of Acts is the chronicle of this unfortunate rejection of Jesus by the Jews. Paul often began his work in a new city by going to the synagogue. There, using scriptural arguments, he would attempt to prove that Jesus was indeed the promised Messiah (see Acts 17:1–3). This strategy generally produced a few disciples, but often resulted in Paul being driven from the synagogue and the city. In Lystra, the unbelieving Jews even attempted to kill Paul by stoning him (Acts 14:19).

Acts ends with Paul in Rome, the great imperial city. He used this opportunity to preach Christ to the Jews there, but he received a mixed reception and many did not believe him. At this point, Paul saw that the Old Testament prophets not only spoke of the Messiah, but they also foresaw the unbelief of Israel. Paul quoted Isaiah 6:9, 10 to the crowd, a horrifying prediction of the rejection of God's message. Why did they rebuff Paul's preaching? Acts does not give us a specific reason. Whatever the

cause, Luke (the author of Acts) is more interested in the result: Paul turns to the Gentiles with the offer of salvation through faith in Christ (Acts 13:46; 28:28).

LESSON BACKGROUND

Time: A.D. 59-61

Place: Rome

Both the book of Acts and Paul's writings testify to the apostle's strong desire to preach the gospel in the great city of Rome. This was based on Paul's conviction that God had destined him to do this (Acts 23:11) and a personal yearning to do so (Romans 1:15). Paul had grown up in Tarsus and had significant ministries in Antioch, Corinth, and Ephesus. These were major, important cities in the Roman Empire, but they did not compare with Rome itself. The old saying that "all roads lead to Rome" was true in many ways. Rome was the center of power, of wealth, and of culture for the entire empire. It had no peer.

Some have compared Paul's desire to go to Rome with that of the aspiring actor who goes to Hollywood or the talented songwriter who goes to Nashville. This is a false portrayal of Paul, however. He did not want to go to Rome in order to further his career. His motivation was a strategic move for the success of the gospel. If Rome could have a strong Christian presence, it would have an oversized impact on the rest of the empire. Just as all roads led *to* Rome, those roads carried people and ideas *from* Rome to the farthest corners of the world.

Paul got the first hint of his eventual ministry in Rome during his Damascus road experience. At that time, it was revealed that he would preach to "Gentiles and kings" (Acts 9:15). The ultimate Gentile king was the Roman emperor, and Paul's appeal to Caesar (see Acts 27:24) gave him the potential opportunity to share the gospel with this very person. This did not happen quickly. Paul endured two years imprisonment in Caesarea Maritime before making his appeal (Acts 24:27). His trip to Rome was not a pleasant journey. He was under armed guard and had to live through a terrifying storm and a shipwreck on Melita (Acts 27:14-28:1). The book of Acts ends with Paul having finally reached Rome and awaiting his audience with the emperor. This is the backdrop for today's lesson.

PAUL'S CASE (Acts 28:16-22)

1. Why was Paul sent to Rome by the Roman authorities? What were his living conditions while under arrest in Rome? (Acts 28:16)

Paul was sent to Rome at his own request in order to appeal the case brought against him by the Jews in Jerusalem (Acts 25:21,26:32). Paul's sea voyage *to Rome* had been overseen by Roman soldiers, but this had not ensured his safety. The shipwreck on the island of Melita (Malta) had stretched what should have been a few weeks' sailing into a voyage of several months. We can imagine the relief of the responsible *centurion* who had traveled with Paul when finally he was able to turn Paul and the other *prisoners* over to the authorities in Rome. We should note that the author of the book, Luke, is with Paul during this odyssey, as indicated by the *we* in his narrative.

As in today's world, Roman legal appeals could move at a snail's pace, so arrangements are made for Paul's detention while awaiting his hearing before the emperor. He is allowed to live in a house, under the guard of a Roman *soldier*. That he had committed no serious crime may have been the key factor in the authorities allowing him to be under house arrest (25:17-19). However, his freedom to move about is restricted by the use of a chain (Acts 28:20), probably an ankle fetter.

The house is more than a small hovel, for it is able to accommodate the many people who will come to hear Paul's message at a future date (Acts 28:23). Paul

takes little time to be settled, for after only *three days* he invites the local Jewish leaders to meet with him. This is not an example of Paul's authority to order these men around, but a reflection of the circumstance of his detention.

2. Why did Paul request a meeting with the Jewish leaders in Rome? (vs. 17-19)

Paul's initial message is not about the gospel, but an explanation of the events that have caused him to be in Rome. In this, he claims categorical innocence, that he has *committed nothing* that could be considered a legitimate offense according to Jewish laws and traditions. Even so, he has been accused, and this has placed him in Roman custody. Paul contends that *the Romans* have found no reason to detain him, and certainly nothing that deserves execution. In this, his situation mirrors that of Jesus in his trial before Pilate (Luke 23:13-16; compare Acts 26:30-32).

Though Paul appealed to Caesar, he was not pressing any charges against the Jewish people. He wanted to assure these Jewish leaders in Rome that he would not present any legal charges against the Jews in court. Paul refrained from providing any names or making any negative remarks about the Jews in Jerusalem who had accused him falsely.

3. For what "cause" was Paul really imprisoned (v. 20)?

Paul gives a bottom line for all of his problems: his preaching of "the hope of Israel." Paul's also called these Jewish leaders together to explain his belief in Israel's messianic hope – a hope he shared with all his fellow Jews, including these leaders.

Israel's hope was in Christ's return and the establishment of His kingdom (Acts 1:6; 26:6-7). Paul's Christian faith also held to this ultimate fulfillment of Israel's kingdom hope. There was no disconnect between the Christian faith and Israel's messianic hope (24:14-15). Paul had a clear conscience before God and men in this matter (v. 16).

4. What had the Jewish leaders heard about Paul from Jerusalem? (v. 21)

The initial reaction of these Roman Jews is guarded. They seem to have no specific knowledge of Paul, and no one has come from Jerusalem to accuse him. However, they have heard of the Christians, whom they consider to be a divisive *sect*, a perversion of Judaism that is notorious and *spoken against*. Nevertheless, they appear to be fair-minded and curious. They have been impressed by Paul enough to want to hear him more fully. This delay is probably so that they can bring others, perhaps respected elders of the Roman synagogues that are not present for this initial meeting.

5. The Jewish leaders in Rome were curious and wanted to hear Paul's explanation about Christianity. Why is evangelism so much more effective when a non-Christian asks us to explain what we believe? How can we create more situations like these?

Until the non-Christian has an interest in what we believe, most of the time he or she will not really listen to what we have to say about it. When people are interested, however, they pay attention. We can gain their interest by being genuinely interested in them. We can build relationships with them and thus earn the right to be heard.

Sometimes the most effective thing we can do in evangelism is to get the non-Christian to tell us what he or she believes: about God, about Christ, about the Bible, about the problem of evil, or about anything else that might serve as an eventual bridge for the gospel. If we are always careful to be respectful and to ask clarifying

questions, non-Christians might ask us what we believe. Then we can tell them, and they will listen!

6. What else did the Jewish leaders in Rome want to hear from Paul? (v. 22)

The leaders further responded that it would be worthwhile to hear Paul explain his doctrinal views. So they appointed him a day. This provided him with the opportunity to witness to them about the gospel. The Lord had revealed to Paul that he would be a witness in Rome (Acts 23:11). The Jewish inquiry about his beliefs had opened that door. God in His providence used Paul's detention in Rome for two years to propagate the gospel (28:30-31).

PAUL'S MESSAGE (Acts 28:23-25a, 28-29)

7. How are the gospel and the kingdom of God interlaced? How did Paul expound on this for the Jewish leaders? (v. 23)

When the day comes, *many* come to hear what Paul has to say. His credentials as a well-educated rabbi and his notoriety produce a strong turnout. The theme of Paul's message is *the kingdom of God*. This is a characteristic expression of Jesus (see Luke 4:43) and describes Jewish belief in the providential activity of God on behalf of their nation (Luke 23:51). Paul's message in a synagogue context often had taken this tack (see Acts 19:8).

Paul gives an exhaustive address, lasting 10 hours or more "from morning till evening" (28:23). This probably included some give-and-take dialogue with the hearers. Paul's method, however, is to examine passages in the writings of *Moses* (Genesis through Deuteronomy) and in the *prophets* (Isaiah through Malachi; perhaps some others).

We know from Paul's letters, most of which have been written by this time, that he uses a wide range of Scripture to understand the significance of the gospel message. For Paul, his message of "Christ crucified" (1 Corinthians 1:23) is not at odds with the Jewish Scriptures, but a fulfillment of them. It is possible that the Jews who have come have brought scrolls of these books to be consulted rather than trusting their memories. The unrolling of the various scrolls may help explain the extended nature of this dialogue.

8. How did Paul's Jewish listeners respond to his message? (vs. 24-25a)

At best, we can say Paul is partially successful. *Some* believe, but others (maybe most) do not. Their own discussions apart from Paul do not result in any sort of consensus, and the meeting breaks up. Before they go, though, Paul gets in *one* last word of a long day. He begins by quoting Isaiah 6:9, 10 (Acts 28:26,27). Then he makes a stunning pronouncement.

9. Paul was able to convince some, but not others. How, if at all, is that encouraging to you as you try to share your faith with others?

Paul's experience in Rome (not unlike his experience in other cities) reminds us that we are not responsible for the way someone else responds to the gospel. Of course, we need to learn all we can about how to present the gospel in a winsome and pleasant manner. But ultimately, we are not responsible for another's response. God Almighty, in all of His sovereign power, will not violate any human being's free will. He will never make someone believe in Him. So, when it comes to preaching the gospel, we must also respect the person's right to choose. We must simply put forth the claims of Christ and then give the person an opportunity to choose.

10. How did Isaiah's prophecy relate to the Jewish leaders' response to Paul's message? (vs. 28-29)

Paul's final pronouncement is not uttered in bitterness or frustration. He has done his duty by presenting the claims of the gospel in great detail to the Jewish community in Rome, and with some success. He knows from experience that *Gentiles* are receptive to his preaching. He is announcing that, within the constraints of his detention, he intends now to seek converts among these non-Jews. We should not understand this as meaning that he has given up on the Jews. He wants to be clear that this message is not just for the people of Israel. It is for everyone.

The arrival of sundown causes the breakup of this meeting (perhaps at the order of the Roman guard), but the discussion among *the Jews* continues. They have "great reasoning among themselves" (v. 29), meaning a spirited, ongoing discussion of what Paul has presented. He has certainly succeeded in spurring them to think carefully about what he has said about Jesus.

PAUL'S MINISTRY (Acts 28:30-31)

11. How did Paul minister in Rome during his imprisonment? (vs. 30-31)

Paul had the freedom to preach in his rented house for the two years that he was detained in Rome. He faithfully witnessed to all who came to hear him. He continued to preach the kingdom of God and the good news regarding Christ.

Although Paul was in chains, the message of the gospel was not bound. He spoke boldly, and no one laid any restrictions on him. The Roman government did not hinder him but allowed him to preach. God upheld His servant and honored Paul's commitment to Christ. The message of the gospel had gone out from Jerusalem to Rome (Acts 1:8). Rome was part of the "uttermost part of the earth."

Paul was confident that he would be released from prison (Phil. 1:24-25; 2:24). While he was at sea during his trip to Rome, the Lord had assured him that he would stand trial before Caesar (Acts 27:24). Tradition tells us that at the end of two years, Paul was set free. He later appeared before the emperor and was executed. God used Paul's life to reach the Roman world with the gospel.

12. Through his two years of confinement in Rome, Paul continued to preach and teach the gospel with bold confidence. What do you think was the source of his boldness? How can you increase your boldness in sharing your faith?

Paul had learned the secret of being content in any circumstance (Philippians 4:11). He had a confidence that he was doing the Lord's will, so he was able to put his life totally in the Lord's hands. For our part, we tend to allow circumstances to determine our outlook. If things are going badly, from our perspective, we may become depressed. We might even begin to think we have done something wrong. We lose confidence, and our ministry slows or grinds to a halt.

Paul did not let outward circumstances control his inner man (see 2 Corinthians 4:16). He kept his faith in God, who will bring about His ultimate purposes in His time. Thus Paul remained confident and preached with boldness.

PRACTICAL POINTS

- 1.** Faithfulness to God often means persecution from people (Acts 28:16).
- 2.** The hardships we face provide unique opportunities for ministry (vs. 17-20).
- 3.** Faithful endurance of trials will often earn us a hearing with unbelievers (vs. 21-22).
- 4.** Our circumstances change, but our message must always be the same (vs. 23-25).

5. Faithful obedience to God breeds boldness in proclaiming His message (vs. 28-29).
6. We should take advantage of every opportunity to explain the gospel (vs. 30-31).

CONCLUSION

Preaching Out of Season

A popular theory in the church today is that God makes “divine appointments” for believers to share the gospel with nonbelievers. Whether this is true or not, we should not deny that opportunities are presented to us in unexpected ways. Perhaps a coworker turns to us for comfort or advice. Maybe a relative asks us about our church or our faith. There might be a friend or neighbor who opens the door for sharing one’s faith in a casual conversation.

Paul’s evangelistic efforts in Rome were not the culmination of a well-executed strategic plan. He found himself in the imperial city after a lengthy, unjust imprisonment in Caesarea and with a legal cloud hanging over him. His initial outreach to the Jews of Rome did not receive the response for which he had hoped. It may have seemed that the timing was wrong, that he should have hunkered down to wait for a better time to preach the gospel to the Romans.

But Paul was not wired that way. There was no wrong time for him to tell people about Jesus. He did not wait for a divine appointment. When he was unable to preach in a certain region, he went elsewhere. When he encountered stubborn unbelief, he moved on to find those who were more receptive.

Whenever the gospel is preached, some believe and some do not. Some believe only after many encounters with Christians and the Word. Some hear many times but never do submit to the lordship of Jesus. But we, in our limited knowledge and perception, never know which person is in what category at any particular time. May we follow Paul’s example and always be ready to present and defend Jesus (1 Peter 3:15). If it is a divine appointment, we have no right to cancel it.

PRAYER

Holy Father, we, like Paul, are not in complete control over where we live and whom we meet. May we always be ready to share the hope of salvation that You have given us through the gospel of Jesus Christ. May we be godly men and women for all times and opportunities. May You give us courage and strength, no matter what the circumstance might be. We pray this in the name of our Savior, Jesus Christ, amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

When a door of opportunity for sharing the gospel closes, God will open a different one.

ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON

Next week begins a new quarter with lessons from Exodus and Psalms. We will look at our incomparable God as one who reveals, sustains, and protects. Next week’s lesson will deal with “**God’s Revelation to Moses.**” In preparation, study Exodus 3:1-22.

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