

## **Acts 28: 11-31 with Mark 16: 15-20 The end is just the beginning...**

**Prayer:** Lord we thank you for the exciting word given to us through the book of Acts. May we be enlightened and inspired as we consider this final chapter and what it means for us. Amen.

Do you ever finish a book and wish it would keep on going because you enjoyed the story so much, you are so connected to the characters, and you want to know what happens next? Well, I think the book of Acts is one of those stories where we don't want it to end and we might feel a little cheated, that it's been cut short.

We've been travelling with Paul all the way to Rome through trials and tribulations, miracles, persecution, death threats, shipwrecks, snake bites and finally he arrives. He is joyfully greeted by Christians who had been waiting for him to come perhaps since receiving a letter from him a couple of years ago. We know that he's been taken there to go before Caesar to present his case for the "supposed" crime he had committed. And we know that at some time Paul was martyred. But we don't get any of those details here...we are left with the knowledge that he was detained in his own rented house for 2 years. No mention of him going before the Emperor, or of what Paul did after those 2 years... One thing we can be sure of is, as long as he was alive Paul would have kept proclaiming Jesus Christ as Messiah and Saviour.

The author of Acts, Luke, is a clever writer, and while we might feel left hanging, I think he has been very deliberate and rounds the book up right where it should be with an extremely satisfactory conclusion that fulfils the goal that was outlined way back in chapter one.

In chapter 1 verse 8 Jesus is about to ascend to heaven but before he goes, he gives the disciples this commission;

*... you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all of Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*

That is what this entire book is about. The Holy Spirit certainly came on them with power at Pentecost where Peter stood up to preach that Jesus was the risen Messiah, and in Jerusalem over 3000 were added to their number on that very first day. Due to persecution the disciples were scattered and were his witnesses throughout Judea and Samaria with many churches being planted and Gentiles being received into the Kingdom of God. We heard of Philip and the Ethiopian, Peter and the Roman Centurion Cornelius, and of course Saul/ Paul's dramatic conversion and his mission to the Gentiles.

We've travelled to many places with Paul, and in the last few chapters he has been on an adventurous journey to Rome after the Jewish leaders wanted him killed, God's hand was

upon him and he was protected by the military as a Roman citizen and his appeal to Caesar is what has sent him on this journey. We get to the final chapter of Acts with Paul's arrival in Rome, where he is a witness to the ends of the earth...

Paul had travelled over 2000km to get there. We may not consider Rome to be the ends of the earth today, but Rome was the power base for the world, a vital place for the good news message of the gospel to spread to and out from. We know that Christianity had already reached Rome before Paul got there, he was greeted by Christians he had written to, and Priscilla and Aquila, whom he met in Corinth had come from Rome when an Emperor had expelled all the Jews many years before. We read in Romans 15 of Paul's longing to go to Rome and he asks them to pray for him to get there, and that he would be kept safe from the unbelievers in Judea and Jerusalem. I'm sure they, nor he, thought he would be going under Roman guard!

For the completion of Acts it is fitting that Paul gets to Rome to bear witness to Christ. Jesus had told him that he would testify about him in Rome.

Paul is known as the apostle to the Gentiles and what a great a city for him to be in to spread the good news. A cosmopolitan city of about 2 million, a very pagan, idolatrous and immoral city, a city full of slaves and when Paul arrived Nero had just become Emperor and what a terrifying thing that was.

But foremost Paul was a Jew and so as always, he begins by testifying to his fellow Jews. Paul loved his Jewish brothers and sisters and longed for them to understand that Jesus was the Messiah so that they could share the hope that Paul had come believe in. I'm sure he was grieved when they would not listen.

Of course, he couldn't go to the synagogue as he was house bound for his imprisonment so he invited the Jewish leaders to come to him. He wanted to share his situation with them and find out if they had received any accusatory letters about him from the High Priest in Jerusalem. He needn't have worried, no letters had arrived, they had no bad reports on Paul, but they did know about this Christianity and that nothing good was said about that. They were interested to hear his understanding and view on this sect.

So, Paul did what he does best, he preached and reasoned from the scriptures going back to Abraham and the prophets finally pointing to Jesus being the promised Messiah, Jesus was the hope for Israel. Jesus was Paul's hope, and he wanted them to recognize and know this for themselves.

Some were convinced, but some would not believe, and they began arguing among themselves. Paul then quotes from and applies the words of the prophet Isaiah to those gathered.

“Go and tell this people:

“Be ever hearing, but never understanding;  
be ever seeing, but never perceiving.’

<sup>10</sup>Make the heart of this people calloused;  
make their ears dull  
and close their eyes.

Otherwise they might see with their eyes,  
hear with their ears,  
understand with their hearts,  
and turn and be healed.”

Paul witnessed to the Jews; but most of them could not hear, could not see nor understand. And so, he turned his attention to witness to the Gentiles who would listen and receive God’s salvation.

He may have been hindered by his ability to go out to the people, but we read that the gospel of the Kingdom of God was preached boldly and *without* hindrance for two whole years as he taught about the Lord Jesus Christ. (What a wonderful time of rest for Paul, not being under threat of being beaten and flogged!) Many may have visited him, heard the good news and gone out and spread it themselves or told others to go and visit Paul.

There’s a story of St Laurence who was a deacon in the Church in Rome in AD 250. The Emperor Valerian had ordered all Bishops, Priests and Deacons to be executed because it was said *that all of Rome were becoming Christians!* How effective was Paul’s preaching and teaching...amazing ongoing evangelization.

We may feel dissatisfied not knowing the details of what happens next, did he travel to Spain which is something he had hoped to do, (also noted in Romans 15), was he martyred in Rome after the great fire when Nero blamed the Christians and put them to death. We can only speculate, but it was mission accomplished for Paul as he reached Rome. Luke wants us to remember that while we may see Peter and Paul as the heroes of this book it is *Jesus* that is the real hero. Paul did not want to preach about himself, only about his Lord and Saviour. He would want the focus to be on him. Jesus is the one who is active in all of the book, he is the one who died that all may be saved. He is the one who sent the Holy Spirit to empower the mission, it was in his name that people were healed and demons were cast out. Not in the name of Peter or Paul. The book of Acts is all about Jesus, and the work of the Holy Spirit in his people.

Paul’s story comes to an end, but the story of the real hero of Acts continues. And so does the commission to continue to tell his story to the ends of the earth.

We are vital actors in the ongoing drama that will not finish until the day Christ returns. We are given the power of the Holy Spirit to be witnesses for Jesus. To shine his light in the world, to preach and teach, to heal those who are hurting, to bring hope to those who despair, grace to those caught up in sin, comfort to those who grieve and freedom to those who are captive to the ways of this world and the devil.

We pray for missionaries who have been called to proclaim God's Kingdom to the ends of the earth in other parts of the world, and there is still a need for that. There are still many people groups who do not know the good news of Jesus Christ. But there are many right here in our own neighbourhood, in our own families, who do not know of the saving grace of Jesus, who are missing out on abundant life with the one who created and loves them so much he died for them.

If you've been inspired and excited reading this book of Acts then I ask you, will you be a part of the ongoing story? Will you ask Jesus to daily fill you with his Spirit, to give you courage and boldness to share your faith?

I believe we are seeing renewal and revival, I pray we will continue to experience the presence of the Holy Spirit filling us, giving us new hope and joy. I pray that we may have a desire to share this hope with our friends and family and anyone that God brings into our path. If you feel hindered in your circumstances, remember Paul was in prison and Jesus still used him mightily. He had time to write letters of encouragement, to pray for all the Churches he'd planted and to welcome and preach to those who came to him.

What a privilege it is to carry on the work that was started on the day of Pentecost, to be partners with those early disciples, working in the power of the Holy Spirit proclaiming Jesus Christ as Lord. Like Paul we will journey through struggles and pain, maybe even feel like we're shipwrecked at times, but remember Jesus is with us. He will empower us to reach the men, women, children, sick ones, the outcasts, those in other faiths, all those who are lost; he calls us to love and proclaim the good news.

Acts is an exciting adventurous story, one that doesn't end there...let's be excited to see miracles happening, and the Kingdom of God growing in this parish of Bass and Phillip Island!

Let's pray: Lord Jesus, thank you for inspiring us through the book of Acts. I pray that you will daily fill us with your Holy Spirit, giving us power and passion and a desire to see people in our community come to know you. Give us a vision for sharing the good news and growing your Kingdom here. May your marvelous story continue through us, may we always have ears to hear, eyes to see and hearts to understand your great love for us and to share and shine that love with the world. In the powerful name of Jesus, I pray. Amen.