

PM Acts 28 The confrontation that never was

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[0 : 00] Read God's Word together in Acts chapter 28. Chapter 27 finishes with high drama as the ship on which Paul is being transported has been blown from one end of the Mediterranean to the other and has crashed into the shore in Malta.

And rather than kill the passengers and the hostages, the soldiers' plan was scorched by the centurion who wished to save Paul and kept the soldiers from carrying out their plan.

He ordered those who could swim to jump overboard first and make for the land and the rest on planks or in pieces of the ship, whatever they could get their hands on.

And so it was that all were brought safely to land. Chapter 28. After we were brought safely through, we then learned that the island was called Malta.

One often asks oneself, could this have been Dumfries?

[1 : 33] When Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks and put them on the fire, a viper came out because of the heat and fastened on his hand.

When the native people saw the creature hanging from his hand, they said to one another, no doubt this man is a murderer. Though he has escaped from the sea, justice has not allowed him to live. He, however, shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm. They were waiting for him to swell up or suddenly fall down dead.

But when they waited a long time and saw no misfortune come to him, they changed their minds and said that he was a god. Now, in the neighbourhood of that place were lands belonging to the chief man of the island named Publius, who received us and entertained us hospitably for three days.

And it happened that the father of Publius lay sick with fever and dysentery. And Paul visited him and prayed and putting his hands on him, healed him.

[2 : 49] And when this had taken place, the rest of the people on the island who had diseases also came and were cured. They also honoured us greatly.

And when we were about to sail, they put on board whatever we needed. After three months, we set sail in a ship that had wintered in the island, a ship of Alexandria with the twin gods Castron Pollux as a figurehead.

Putting in at Syracuse, we stayed there for three days. And from there, we made a circuit and arrived at Regium. And after one day, a south wind sprang up.

And on the second day, we came to Puteoli. There we found brothers and were invited to stay with them for seven days. And so we came to Rome.

And the brothers there, when they heard about us, came as far as the Forum of Appius and three taverns to meet us.

[3 : 59] On seeing them, Paul thanked God and took courage. And when we came into Rome, Paul was allowed to stay by himself with the soldier that guarded him.

After three days, he called together the local leaders of the Jews. And when they had gathered, he said to them, Brothers, though I had done nothing against our people or the customs of our fathers, yet I was delivered as a prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans.

When they had examined me, they wished to set me at liberty, because there was no reason for the death penalty in my case. But because the Jews objected, I was compelled to appeal to Caesar, though I had no charge to bring against my nation.

For this reason, therefore, I have asked to see you and speak with you, since it is because of the hope of Israel that I am wearing this chain.

And they said to him, We have received no letters from Judea about you, and none of the brothers coming here has reported or spoken any evil about you. But we desire to hear from you what your

views are.

[5 : 22] For with regard to this sect, we know that everywhere it is spoken against. When they had appointed a day for him, they came to him at his lodging in greater numbers.

And from morning till evening he expounded to them, testifying to the kingdom of God, and trying to convince them about Jesus, both from the law of Moses and from the prophets.

And some were convinced by what he said, but others disbelieved. And disagreeing among themselves, they departed after Paul had made one statement.

The Holy Spirit was right in saying to your fathers through Isaiah the prophet, Go to this people and say, You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive.

For this people's heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they've got closed. Lest they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and turn, and I would heal them.

[6 : 37] Therefore, let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles. They will listen.

He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God, and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ.

with all boldness, and without hindrance. Amen. May God bless his word to us. So we've read the end of the book of Acts, and this evening I hope that we'll be able to continue bookending, as I suggested we would this morning.

The book of Acts of the Apostles was written by a fellow physician, Dr. Luke. And of course we're familiar with the fact that he wrote the Gospel of Luke as well, that, and to quote, orderly account for the most excellent Theophilus of the things handed down to him by those who were eyewitnesses of all that happened to Jesus of Nazareth, and those who were servants of the word.

That's how it's put in Luke chapter 1, verses 1 to 4. And as I read these verses, I can imagine the effort expended in the forensic collecting and collating of details that comprised this paper that Luke was writing.

[8 : 23] And this was so that Theophilus would know the certainty, the absolute truth, of the things he had been taught. Now, Luke's Gospel finishes in quite a stark and surprising way with the following verse.

And it's a verse that refers to those eleven, cowed, timorous disciples who had recently been hiding in a locked room in Jerusalem for fear of the Jews.

Now, 40 days later, Luke 24, 53, this is how Luke ends, they stayed continually at the temple praising God.

That is to say, in full view. No locked doors anymore. In fact, they're quite loudly and demonstrably advertising themselves.

They're setting out their stall in front of the very same people who so scared them previously. The people who had crucified the Lord. A behavioural sea change, we might call it.

[9 : 40] Surely this means there's trouble round the corner. And that's how Luke leaves us at the end of the Gospel of Luke dangling.

Waiting the sequel. Luke 2, the return of the disciples. Or Luke 2, church wars. The ethnic cleansing. And we're not disappointed by Luke volume 2, commonly known as the Acts of the Apostles.

Which is actually a surprising title as we start to read Acts 1 because Theophilus is again being blessed with not the Acts of the Apostles as such but with Jesus part 2.

That is, if Luke is to be believed. You see, in the first sentence of the new book Luke says that in his first book he wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven.

that event described in part at the end of chapter 4 of Luke. But the implication is that the Acts of the Apostles is in fact the Acts of Jesus continued.

[11 : 02] The Acts of Jesus by proxy as God's Holy Spirit already breathed on the disciples by the Master himself in John 20, 23 the Spirit falls on the wider church with supernatural power and effect as we read about it in Acts chapter 2.

Now we see the Holy Spirit himself powerfully at work in the 28 chapters of Acts. But there's a real clue as to Jesus' own personal involvement in chapter 9 verse 4 where Saul of Tarsus the personification of evil is making his way to Damascus to try to eradicate followers of the way.

And then he's halted in his tracks by a light that flashed from heaven around him and rendered him down on the ground scared witless.

Remember that voice that voice Saul Saul why do you persecute me? And as far as Saul was concerned Jesus of Nazareth had died on Calvary crucified years before maybe five years before he was history end of but this voice identifies himself in no uncertain terms I am Jesus whom you are persecuting and in so doing we see with crystal clarity that Jesus Christ of Nazareth crucified resurrected ascended our intercessor at God's right hand identifies himself with his body the church his suffering church and that he remains active in the affairs of his church when the church suffers he feels the pain when the church is persecuted he takes it personally and what an encouragement for us today that whatever happens to the church in Scotland the church in Dumfries the church here the Lord

Jesus feels this personally deeply we are his people members of his body no wonder he promises that he will never ever leave us or forsake us so as the church on earth is established here in Acts and starts to grow we have it described in Luke part 2 all that Jesus continued to do subtitle the Acts of the Apostles now I'm sure we've all read the Acts of the Apostles many times and we know the story of how Peter preached at Pentecost after the Holy Spirit came down in tongues of fire on the early believers how the church grew despite ecclesiastical opposition how persecution led to the dispersal of the good news to Judea to Samaria to the ends of the earth and how many were prepared to give their lives as witnesses the Greek word for witnesses is martyroi as martyrs just like

[14:59] Stephen did literally we see in the book of Acts how the arch persecutor Saul of Tarsus was wonderfully converted on the Damascus road with a personal encounter with the risen ascended Lord Jesus how it became clear that the gospel of Jesus was for all ethnic Jews and ethnic Gentiles alike together the spiritual the real Israel and we see how Paul sometimes with Barnabas undertook three world tours as we would say nowadays three missionary journeys perhaps would be the more accepted term but if we read 2 Corinthians 11 we see there that this missionary endeavour was not plain sailing it was met with great opposition and the devil used every means at his disposal to block and harm and obstruct the spread of the gospel unsuccessfully

I might add and we read there of Paul's hard work his imprisonments his floggings his exposure to death his receiving the 40 lashes minus 1 which is often a fatal punishment he faced beating with rods pelting with stones shipwreck being cast away at sea being attacked by bandits and by Jews and Gentiles for one reason or another he suffered lack of sleep lack of food lack of fluid he suffered from cold and inadequate clothing and all sorts of psychological pressures it wasn't plain sailing yet the church was expanding and expanding it was being spread to the known world by that amazing network of roads established by Roman Empire for military and trading purposes but used by God's foreknowledge for the spread of the truth about Jesus but one place

Paul had not been able to reach or visit in his journeys was Rome then the scheming of the religious hierarchy in Jerusalem to assassinate Paul excuse me led to legal proceedings! corrupt and protracted judicial processes we wonder about our own courts and the length of time they take to process things but two years it took there and these processes prompted what had always been on Paul's heart to get to Rome and the opportunity was made because God makes all things work together for good for those who are called according to his purpose and the opportunity arose by appealing to Caesar to clear his name before Festus and the Romans locally in Judea but he could only do this by submitting himself to judicial due process in the heart of the empire in Rome itself something which was his right as a Roman citizen you know we sometimes ourselves have aspirations to do certain things or to go certain places and we think to ourselves I'll do it that way but I think we would all testify that our heavenly father says no not that way but this way and we have to be prepared to be led by his spirit and then when we get where we're going and we look back we can say ah he does all things well well that trial that due process coming to its culmination would have been held possibly in the Colosseum before the infamous emperor Nero who was renowned for his cruelty and his debauchery so as Acts draws to a conclusion the temperature is rising and we can sense that confrontation is on the horizon like an unchoreographed wrestling contest between the head of the greatest empire the world had ever seen versus the diminutive orator with the massive intellect from Turkey who had nothing of this world's goods but he'd had greater influence on the lives and behaviours of Romans and their slaves than any single person in the entire history of the empire so it's showdown time folks

[20 : 16] Paul and Nero the tension builds and we've got that awful dangerous journey the shipwreck in Malta now into chapter 28 Paul and his Roman guard have recuperated for the winter in Malta and they've set sail for Rome and so we come to the last page of the book last page of the book of Acts we're expecting the encounter the denouement but it must be a very brief one because there's only one page there how can that be have I missed something no the next page is Romans and that was written several years earlier so where is the showdown where is the Coliseum fight where is the meeting of the Titans at a first glance Acts 28 is a damp squib no confrontation is recorded you might think the story peters out a bit

Jonah like perhaps maybe not with such a good grace I suppose we'd better look at what it says in that last section verses 17 to 31 and look at those last two verses the ending it is God's word I suppose now I am sounding like Jonah well it may be a wee bit different from our legal system and electronic tagging had not yet been invented but it looks as if Paul is under house arrest his tag is not electronic but human and he is constantly chained to a Roman soldier he's rented a property in Rome while the legal system grinds slowly and I imagine he has to ply his tent making trade to pay for the privilege because just like in Acts 18 verse 3 it tells us he paid for this house himself now he had nothing he had been shipwrecked he had no possessions no goods no nothing no collateral tent making of course meant leather making because tents in those days were made of animal skin canvas hadn't been invented yet so leather working might have stretched to other items too anyway he has arrived in Rome he's got no assets other than what others might have gifted to him and this would surely have been a modest property which he was able to afford to rent and it would have to house his leather work as well but this was also where he entertained visitors and it's where he lived worked slept entertained all in the one space probably in the one room that would not have been unusual in those times verse 17 begins after three days so what did he do for the three days well I imagine being the dynamo that he was he got the rental set to rights he got his tent making gear together and he prayed he knew the importance of stepping back and pausing remember his years in

Arabia and Damascus after his conversion before he presented himself to the apostles in Jerusalem as we read about it in Galatians chapter 1 now I'm not suggesting the three day timing was necessarily deliberate on his part but maybe he felt significance to a period of three days as had Jonah from the great fish and Jesus his Lord from the grave and now Paul emerged from his own version of solitary to engage with sinners needing saved God but to adopt a phrase from reality TV Paul then experiences a reversal of roles the man who had buzzed round the Mediterranean travelling thousands upon thousands of miles by road and by sea visiting town and city upon town and city is now stuck in one room under house arrest and instead of going to all and sundry to preach the gospel all and sundry instead have to come to him so here this man of massive intellect and indomitable spirit a debater in the

Areopagus an addresser of crowds and courts of mobs of synagogues he's confined to one room and he's chained to another human being you can almost see him in verse 20 there lifting and rattling his chain truly a reversal of roles the visitor becomes the visited now age and ill health may visit a similar role on some of us but that's a wee bit different from this situation with Paul curiously too in all his travels that he had experienced as Newton puts it many dangers trials and snares as we describe them from 2 Corinthians 11 be that as it may he's now static at the very heart of danger at the very heart of empire within touching distance it feels of Nero and his unpredictable vicious persecution

I imagine even Paul took a few deep breaths but then he began he starts as we read it in verses 17 through 31 by deploying his regular tactic he goes to the Jews first and he invites the local Jewish leaders that is the synagogue leaders to visit him and remember on all the stops in his world tours that he would begin in the synagogues making contact with Jews whose hearts he prayed would be open to the gospel truth fulfilling the promises of scripture and then if his message was rejected and he was de-friended so to speak he would move on to and meet with the Gentiles in this instance in verse 17 he invites the Jewish leaders to his house apparently not so much to evangelize in the first instance but to parley to to use a

[27 : 45] Glaswegian expression I suspect Paul wanted to see just how shugly was the peg on which he'd placed his cloak you see these had these leaders been pre-warned by others from Jerusalem about Paul's legal battles in Jerusalem and Caesarea have they got an inbuilt hostility to them have they prejudged him are they going to say things to Nero about him but not so they hadn't

heard a cheap but they weren't ignorant either they knew that to use their own words everywhere this sect that is followers of the way Christians is spoken against what an interesting comment Christianity was an active subject even in Italy at that stage and we might take that to mean an active subject with Jews and Romans but with a negative press now call me cynical but if I see someone nowadays in handcuffs

I usually expect that the authorities have a valid and justifiable reason for having done the chaining it may not necessarily have been such a foregone conclusion in the time of the Roman Empire but just contemplate here are the synagogue leaders invited to visit a wee fellow in a single end chained to a soldier and he's proclaiming his innocence they may have reasonably enjoyed a little scepticism about this claim aye right but notice how wise Paul is as he behaves as his own apologist he is very gracious no ranting or raving about his innocence he is dignified in his speech and in his behaviour no pouting no recriminations he is wise no anti Jewish leader accusations I certainly didn't intend he says to bring any charge against my own people and he's respectful and friendly he just wants to introduce himself explain himself because he wanted to engage with them his very own people by birth remember he was of the tribe of Benjamin a Hebrew of the Hebrews as to the law of Pharisee however Paul is utterly truthful in what he says there he doesn't miss the mark in any way and we have this wonderful statement it is because of the hope of Israel he says that I am wearing this chain I do imagine him lifting the chain and shaking it it is because of the hope of Israel so the crux of the situation is the hope of Israel that is

Paul's problem what or who is the hope of Israel that would be the Messiah the longed for Messiah who would restore the kingdom and breathe new life into captive Israel Bishop J.C.

Ryle summarizes the hope of Israel beautifully identifying him right there as Christ Jesus Christ he says is the summoned substance of the Old Testament to him the earliest promises pointed in the days of Adam and Enoch and Noah and Abraham and Isaac and Jacob to him every sacrifice pointed in the ceremonial worship appointed at Mount Sinai of Jesus every high priest was a type and every part of the tabernacle was a shadow and every judge and deliverer of Israel was a figure he was the prophet like unto Moses whom the Lord God promised to send and the king of the house of David who came to be David's Lord as well his son he was the son of the virgin he was the lamb foretold by Isaiah the righteous branch mentioned by Jeremiah the true shepherd foreseen by Ezekiel the messenger of the covenant promised by

[32 : 43] Malachi and the Messiah who according to Daniel was to be cut off though not for himself this hope was the cause of his problems claims Paul and the local leaders appetites were clearly whetted by what he had to say they really wanted to hear Paul's views and all this so verse 22 out came the diaries and they appointed a day for him verse 23 and they came to him at his lodging come prison in greater numbers again we've got to get our heads around the picture of these Jewish leaders and diminutive Paul crammed into one hot room along with all the leather gear and its associated smells I think it had more in common with a fisherman's cottage in the north of

Scotland a century ago than certainly Dumfries Baptist Church or Dumfries Free Church of today so Paul has gone from prayerful preparation to his reversal of roles to sussing out the locals to now despite being chained he starts on unfettered unchained reasoning discussion persuasion explanation witnessing testifying expounding from morning till evening and for a moment when we're reading this we might imagine we're back at the last chapter of Luke's gospel with Jesus words to his disciples Luke 24 44 these are my words that I spoke to you said Jesus while I was still with you that everything written about me in the law of

Moses and the prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled this is Paul's theme as well then Jesus opened their minds to understand the scriptures and said to them thus it is written that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations beginning from Jerusalem so if we now jump from that previous revelation of truth to Paul in Acts 28 we find him doing what Jesus did though to a much less receptive audience he too expounded the scripture from dawn to dusk trying to convince him about Jesus from the law of Moses and from the prophets and when asked for Jesus at that point it was his eleven disciples who were his audience and it was like scales falling from their eyes as they grasped the truth about all of the

Old Testament but Paul here has a mixed response it says some were convinced but others disbelieved!

Has this not always been the way and will it not always be the way till that day comes which we read about in Philippians 2 when every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father!

[36 : 31] But whatever the response whatever the reaction in that room in Rome it is clear that no matter how fettered and chained Paul may have been in a physical sense the gospel of Jesus and the word of God was and is unchained unfettered and like the double edged sword it is it pierced and divided the Jews who heard it they disputed amongst themselves verse 29 they disagreed with each other and so we see history repeating itself it's the same heat that hardens clay as melts wax the message of chapter 28 verses 26 and 27 from Paul to these Jews is the same message that Isaiah gave to the northern kingdom of the ten tribes in

Isaiah 6 it's the same message as Jeremiah gave to the southern kingdom of Judea over a century later in Jeremiah 5 21 it's the same message that Ezekiel gave to the exiled Jews of Judea beside the Kedar river in Babylon in Ezekiel 12 and 2 it's the same message the Lord Jesus gave to explain his use of parables in the presence of heart hardened Pharisees in Matthew 13 they did not have ears to hear they would not listen and now that same Holy Spirit who fell on the crowd of believers at Pentecost makes a further appearance at the end of this book verse 25 the meeting broke up after Paul made this statement the

Holy Spirit was right in saying to your fathers through Isaiah the prophet and so on the pronouncements of scripture are indeed the words of the Spirit Genesis to Revelation and the pronouncement of verse 28 turns out to be a statement of immense climactic importance and a fitting conclusion to any major work let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles hallelujah they will listen and that's why we are here tonight we are in obedience to that sentence it's you and it's me that's being talked about there there is a direct traceable evident link between the dealings of that single end in

Rome and that particular day and you and me worshipping here tonight because verse 30 and verse 31 tell us what the consequence the outworking of verse 28 was incarcerated Paul received all and sundry from all over the known world all roads leading as they did to Rome and there he evangelised them he he evangelised to the ends of the earth in a way that he could never have achieved by his previous itinerant preaching he evangelised in a welcoming but bold and unhindered way those who heard him and were blessed with those wonderful insights into the lordship of Christ went back from Rome to the ends of the earth he had included to these isles and brought the good news about Jesus you see the acts the book of acts was never primarily about individual apostles and their adventures or indeed any confrontation with Roman authority it was and is the saga of what

Jesus continued to do by his spirit in spreading the gospel good news for everyone and the climax was that this good news is for us Gentiles too and the trailer is that for two solid years spirit filled people were in and out of the Paul one room seminary and they were taking the good news out and away and away and we're still continuing that we're still continuing that work to this very day so did Paul confront Nero we're not told here did he end up being thrown to the lions no not at this time there's good evidence from a whole range of sources that Paul was released after a couple of years and he went on to undertake a fourth world tour and was able even to reach Spain this time but more to the point what happened to Dr.

[42 : 07] Luke the chronicler stops at Acts 28 31 and we don't know what happened to him thereafter but what an ending to the book we have the gospel on the move we have the Holy Spirit at work we have the Lord Jesus being proclaimed we have God being glorified in fact that verse that last verse of Acts 28 there we have a Trinitarian testimony written by the Spirit proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus a best seller I would say what about you let's pray together heavenly Father how great you are when we grasp a little of the history

Father of what happened in those two years in Rome we can see that the gospel which is so dear to our hearts that you directed this by your spirit to the ends of the earth and how wonderful Father that this has been passed down to us in writing by word of mouth by people's lives by all the evidences that you give us and Father you are so gracious to us you've given us this word help us to realise how precious this is help us to drink it in and to worship and praise you and magnify you for for the fact that in that past eternity you had picked out your own that you had a plan in place and Father we struggle to get our heads round the magnitude of your love that that plan involved the death of your son bearing our sin melt our hearts

Lord help us to get even a little glimpse of how great your love has been to us and help us Father to be so encouraged that you will never let us go no one and nothing can pluck us from your hand ah Father thank you thank you for Jesus thank you for your word thank you for your promises thank you for salvation in Jesus name Amen God