

50a ACTS

This is Tuesday, the 28th of September, 2004. We're going to continue our study tonight in Acts. We'll be missing a lesson on Friday, and we'll also be missing our Sunday study this week.

And I want to continue with what we saw this past Friday night in the book of Acts, because we left Paul and his companions floating in the water on wreckage, and that's just an unkind thing to do for two whole weeks. And we didn't really get to the part that I had hoped to get to, so being captain of the ship here, we're going to drive on in Acts. What I would like to do, though, is begin by taking just a moment at the outset to go to the Lord in prayer.

It gives us a chance to clear our minds and prepare our hearts. This study will sort of stand by itself if someone is not in the Acts series and stumbles on this by accident. But let's take a moment and go to the Lord in prayer.

Father, we are grateful for another opportunity to refresh our souls through the study of your Word. We thank you for the ministry of your Holy Spirit. We thank you for the opportunity to be transformed, to avail ourselves of power that is not accessible to the carnal mind, that is not available to the human being, apart from your grace and apart from your Son, the Lord Jesus.

We pray that you will bless us as we study. Help us to see the meaning and the application of your Word to our lives. We pray it in Jesus' name.

Amen. Well, we find ourselves in Acts 27, and this is the great shipwreck story of the Apostle Paul. Paul has been an apostle and has completed his three missionary journeys.

He has established churches. He has built up people in the faith. He is active in fulfilling the commission that the Lord Jesus gave him, beginning on the Damascus Road, to carry the good news of Jesus Christ, the gospel and the new doctrines of the church age to the Gentiles.

But, having a great love for his own people, having excelled among them as a Pharisee, and with his understanding of the plan of God, with its roots in the Old Testament and its fulfillment in Christ and in the early church, he has this burning desire to transmit that information to his people. The Lord Jesus commissioned eleven disciples to be witnesses to him, both in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, until the end of the age. That was their job.

Very small locale, eleven men to do it. The whole rest of the world was essentially assigned to the Apostle Paul. But, he decided that he had to go back into Jerusalem and try to win his own people.

If you have any questions about his motives, read Romans 9, 10, and 11, where he talks about his love for the people of Israel. He knows that God has not cast them off. He is desirous of them to return to their days of glory in the plan and purpose of God.

As a result of making this decision, God begins to send Paul information. Don't go. Bondage and chains await you in Jerusalem.

Well, this is not the ideal environment for establishing churches and training a generation of pastors and so on. Paul, I think in an ironic way, sees this as a challenge to his faith and says, I am willing both to suffer imprisonment and even to die for the sake of the gospel. It's a wonderful motivation, but being dedicated doesn't make you right.

It is not your level of fervency. It is not your level of commitment. It is your level of understanding and adherence to the scriptures that God measures us by.

Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. You have Islamic terrorists laying down their lives. You have Palestinian terrorists laying down their lives on behalf of their fellow travelers in their religion.

And that does not count as love, even though they may be in some misguided universe of their own, thinking that they are serving God, that they are serving their fellow man, that they are serving the high ideals of their religion. There is only one standard that counts, and that's God's standard. God is not pleased by suicide bombings for any reason.

God is not pleased by the murder of others for any reason. I say murder with full intent, that is by the definition of the word. It does not include killing in combat.

It does not include capital punishment. It does not include killing in self-defense. It does include killing for the wrong reasons, murdering with malice of forethought, not in faith, not as a part of the plan and purpose of God.

We saw a short tribute to the early modern hero of the faith, John Huss, this past week, who began life as a priest in Bohemia, eventually found himself in Germany. This was back in the early 1400s, 1410, 1414, along in there. And he thought like we do.

He felt like you ought to be able to look into the word of God and see what it says. And as he studied the word of God, he found things that were at variance with the practice of the church of his day, and with the ecclesiastical authorities of his day. He did not try to sow the seeds of rebellion.

He did not try to upset the apple cart. All he wanted to do was teach the scriptures. We take that for granted.

We can study them. We can proclaim them. We can take notes.

We can read. We can do whatever we want without fear of reprisal. But John Huss was burned at the stake for far less difference of opinion than what we might have with our modern church.

They never specified his heresies. They could never demonstrate from scripture where he was wrong, and they never tried. They avoided it at all costs.

And since that time, there have been many others, Tyndale, Wycliffe, and a host of unnamed and unnumbered martyrs in the 1400s, 1500s, and even into the 1600s, who died. You can go in England to places and find markers for people who were burned at the stake for reading their Bible, just reading the Bible. And they died in the flames.

Families, children, fathers and husbands. So it's a wonderful thing to be able to proclaim the gospel and to be fervent about it and to be committed to it. But you have to be committed to the right things.

Paul the Apostle, nobody, I don't think, has ever questioned his commitment. He was a committed Pharisee. He was a committed apostle of Christianity.

But in your commitment, you have to be right. You can be committed as a husband or committed as a wife. You can be committed as a parent.

You can be committed as a child. And you can say, but I'm fervent. I'm dedicated.

I'm doing this out of intense love, out of intense devotion. I realize that this is an important thing. And I'm very fervent and I'm very intense and motivated.

Well, intensity, commitment, and motivation are wonderful things when you are in the right. You have to be sure you're right. Why do we have 435 separate denominations? That was 15 years ago.

There's no telling how many new ones have been invented since then. I was reading up. My mind had gotten a little rusty on some of the cults.

You get away from them and you tend to shove them out of your consciousness. But we were driving home the other day and saw a couple of guys on bicycles. And I'd kind of forgotten the whole spiel.

So I did a little research this past week, refreshing my mind on the church of quote-unquote Latter-day Saints, as well as the Jehovah's Witnesses. Did you realize that the Joseph Smith episode, when he first decided that he had had a revelation from God, occurred in about 1805? What about all the myriad thousands and millions of human beings before that time? Because they believe nobody's saved unless you're a Mormon. They also believe that the Lord Jesus came back in 1914.

And, you know, it's just, you can't believe all the strange nonsense. Actually, I think that

may be the JW's that think Jesus came back in 1914. I was reading about them today.

That religion, by the way, the quote-unquote Jehovah's Witnesses, was founded in, I think, 1879. It's very recent, very strange. But here's the point.

The Apostle Paul is very dedicated, willing to die, but he's going in the wrong direction. And you'll remember from the time that he began going, all of the supernatural activity was in people other than the Apostle Paul. There's no account of healing.

There's no account of conversion. There's no account of making an impact with the Gospel on Gentiles. From the time he makes that decision until he arrives in Jerusalem, there's no fruit and no production and no divine manifestation in the life of the Apostle Paul.

He does a lot of talking, but God does not seem to be in it. God is in others coming to Paul, wanting him not to go. Once he gets there, once he plays out this bad idea, the Lord Jesus appears to him and says, Now that you've testified for me in Jerusalem, you will also testify for me in Rome, which is where you're supposed to be to begin with.

That's my little addition. So now he has begun going this other way. Now here's what fascinates me.

They take him. You remember, you have the centurion who takes him from Jerusalem to Caesarea. How long does he stay in Caesarea? Two years.

Felix is there. Felix has to leave. Festus comes in.

Agrippa comes down. Bernice, we went through that all real recently. And supposedly in the King James, Agrippa says, Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian.

We looked at that. In short, you're saying if I believe the prophets, I should become a Christian. This is what Agrippa counters with.

Almost a question in response to a question. And the meeting breaks up and they say, If he hadn't appealed to Caesar, he could be set free. So, the decision is now made.

Paul has been in Caesarea for over two years. Now he is on board ship. He sails and they go up the coast in a small vessel.

They go up to Sidon, which is now in Lebanon. They go across between Cyprus and the northern coast area there. And they arrive at a place and then they change ships.

And Publius, the man who is in charge of him here, gets him on a great big ship. And this ship has about 275 people on it. So, now they're going to sail and try to make for Rome.

And as they start out, they have contrary winds. And they are resisted. And they finally

make it down to a port where they remain.

And it looks as the weather is settling in. They're in this little Fair Havens port. That's as far as they've been able to get.

And they say, well, if we could just get a little bit further and get over to Phoenix, we could winter there. It's only about a 40 mile sail along the southern coast of the island there. If you have a map in the back of your Bible, you may have something that shows you the route of this.

It may be labeled the fourth journey, as it is in my Bible. And so, depending on which map you have and how big it is, you should see the island of Crete out there in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea with Fair Havens. And if you look at the shape of Crete, you'll notice that if you try to sail west from Fair Havens, the island narrows down.

And if you can see a topographical map, the elevation goes way down. A northerly wind comes blowing through there. They started out with a southerly wind that helps them hug the coast.

Ancient sailors liked to keep in sight of land. And so they'll always kind of follow the coast and never get too far out of sight of land. However, when they try to go from there to this western tip of the island, where Phoenix is, the wind direction shifts 180 degrees, comes out of the north and blows them off course.

Nobody knows the course. Some of you have spirals and squiggles. Others of you have a straight line on your map.

My map has a line that goes way up to the north, but I think it probably went further to the south. And Paul is now going to end up way over at Malta. And this is where we find the, after all of these horrendous experiences of Chapter 27, we find him now with the ship destroyed on the reef, bobbing in the water.

Everyone is hanging under wreckage. The Roman guards who were in charge of this group of prisoners wanted to slay them all, because in Roman law, if a guard allowed a prisoner to escape, the guard would then suffer the penalty. He would fulfill the sentence of the escaped convict.

So they want to take no chances. They don't know what's up with these prisoners, but they figure it's better to kill them than to be held accountable for their sentences, whatever they may be. But the Publius there, the fellow in charge, talks them out of that and tells them all to grab hold and head for the shore.

So he kept them from that intention, verse 43, and commanded those who could swim, jump overboard first and get to land. The rest would follow on planks, various things from the ship. So it happened that they all were brought safely to land.

That's the last verse of chapter 27. So now they are safe at Malta. When they had been brought safely through, we found that the island was called Malta.

Some of your versions may say Melita, or words to that effect. This actually is the ancient Phoenician name. This island was colonized in about 1000 B.C. by Phoenician people, and they spoke a whole different language back then.

They wound up having their own dialect there. And Melita in that language, that by the way was my great-grandmother's first name, means shelter or haven. And of course being out there south of Sicily, one of the few places where there is any place to berth and get off the sea for a while, that was the name, and it has come down to us as Malta, due south of Sicily.

So they find themselves on this island, and the first order of business is to get dry and get warm. Well, people saw the ship come in as people on the shore often do. If you ever go to Boston Harbor and go to the southern end, Boston Harbor is noted for its many shipwrecks in the last century and the century before that, and they had a life-saving station there where they would go out and find people who were getting dashed to pieces on the rocks and bring them in.

They developed a whole technology for life-saving. Well, the natives, the people, the indigenous people, this in Greek, by the way, in verse 2 of chapter 28, is Barbaroi, because it's barbarians. And this was the name that the Greeks and the Romans gave to people who didn't speak Greek or Latin because the other languages just sounded like bar, bar, bar, bar, bar, bar, bar, bar.

And so it's onomopoetic. They just say, well, they're just the, we might call them the yap-yaps or something. All the yip-yaps.

They called them barbans or barbaroi. So the indigenous people showed us extraordinary kindness. This is a word you will recognize in Greek, philanthropion.

They were philanthropists, these native people. Because of the rain that had set in and because of the cold, they kindled a fire and received us all. But when Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks and laid them on the fire, a viper came out because of the heat and fastened itself on his hand.

When the natives, and once again, these are the barbaroi, saw the creature hanging from his hand, they said to one another, undoubtedly this man is a murderer and though he has been saved from the sea, justice has not allowed him to live. Now this is a fascinating statement because it's not the first time that a statement like this was made. There is a historian, an ancient historian named Statilius Flaxus, and he wrote an epitaph for a shipwrecked sailor who was killed by snakebite.

He wrote this story. Oh, he escaped the storm and the raging of the murderous sea, but

as he lay stranded in the Libyan sand not far from the beach and heavy with sleep, at last, naked and destitute, weary as he was from the terrible shipwreck, the vipers struck him dead. Why did he struggle against the waves? He did not escape the lot which was destined for him on land.

That's from Flaxus' Palatine Anthology, and it's relatively contemporaneous with this time. Today, if you go to the island of Malta, there are no venomous snakes. Evidently the Barbaroi went around there and shoveled them all to death.

It's not like a fresh supply coming in, so people got tired of being bitten by snakes and killed them all. But what we're going to see here is Paul is unaffected by the snakebite. So at first they think, well, he's a criminal and the fates are going to get him, and then when he's unaffected by the viperbite, they see the snake hanging by its fangs from his hand, and Paul looks at it and just goes over to the fire and flicks his hand and shakes the snake into the fire.

Then they decide when nothing bad happens to him, he doesn't swell up, he doesn't know mischief follows, that he's a god. Unlike some of the people that had seen Paul and decided he was a god before. Remember in Lystra, they thought Paul and Barnabas were gods.

Of course, later on they wound up getting stoned. Back in chapter 14, they didn't try to worship him, they just said he must be a god or in with the gods or whatever. But this tells us that Paul... You notice, what has happened now? And here's my point for our first session.

From the time that Paul leaves Jerusalem and is headed in the right direction, God begins to talk to him directly, not through intermediaries. Jesus appears to him in Jerusalem and says you're going to go to Rome. He is given two solid years in Caesarea.

Two years to continue ministry in the Greek capital of Israel, the Greek capital of the Roman province of Syria, not the Hebrew one. Two whole years, freedom to come and go. He has many visitors, his ministry and outreach are as great as they have ever been.

Now that he's on this voyage, God has appeared to him and spoken to him multiple times. Told him originally that if they leave, they would all be killed. Told him later on that they would be spared, but only if they kept the sailors in the boat and only if they did what Paul said.

Now, God has supernaturally intervened and has completely counteracted the venom of the viper and has given Paul an instant witness here on the island of Malta. We're going to see, as we move through this chapter, that Paul and his companions, which include Luke and Aristarchus, are going to spend three months, they're going to winter at Malta. And as a result, the governor of Malta and a large portion of the population are going to

receive this witness and this testimony.

It puts me in mind of Jesus going all the way across the Sea of Galilee, his disciples surviving the storm, all for the sake of the one demon-possessed man. It reminds me of the woman at the well or the Syrophoenician woman where many times you find Jesus going a great distance for the sake of one person. Here, the normal course, all of this blowing off course and 14 days on the sea with no sight of land and no hope and all is lost, they wind up going somewhere they never would have otherwise gone.

They wind up at Malta. And as a result of this, there is going to be a great... In fact, even today, they have a bay in Malta named after St. Paul. It's been named that ever since he was there.

And there has been a Maltese church and a Maltese Christian witness ever since the earliest days of the church because God put the Apostle Paul there because there were people who were receptive, there were people who were interested. The ultimate goal, and here's the point, there is an ultimate destination that God is taking Paul. And that's Rome.

It's Caesar. But, just like you, and just like me, there are things that need to take place on the journey. There needs to be opposition.

There needs to be occasions for faith. There needs to be occasions for witness. There needs to be occasion for prayer.

There needs to be occasion for the application of the Word of God. None of that took place. As dedicated as Paul was in going to Jerusalem, none of that took place when he was on his way to Jerusalem.

Now that he is in the will of God, all of that is taking place in God's timetable, in God's way, in God's time, with God's power, and God's blessing. That can be true of you and me. It is most important that as we travel through this life, we make sure that not only are we committed, and not only are we motivated, but that we're right.

That we're in God's will. That we're in God's plan and purpose. When that is the case, we can expect to see.

We're not going to see miraculous deliverances from snakebites necessarily. We're not going to have personal appearances in the night by the Lord Jesus Christ. But what we are going to see is the active power of God at work in our lives.

Do you see the analogy? Do you see the comparison? God will confirm. The Holy Spirit will affirm the power of His word in our soul. It has to be something that we want.

It has to be something that we request. It has to be something that we pursue, so that

God can work His will and His purpose in us. The Apostle Paul is now once again doing the very mission for which he was commissioned.

Even though he is in chains, God is putting him exactly where he needs to be, at exactly the time that he needs to be there. And God is demonstrating His power in and through the Apostle Paul. And it is a terrific testimony.

This chapter 27 is altogether different than 25 and 26, isn't it? It's altogether different. Our lives, your life, and my life can be altogether different when we make sure that we're in the center of God's will. Well, how do we do that? Well, by just what we're doing tonight.

By studying God's word. By meditating on it when we're not in class. By thinking about it on other days and at other times.

Looking at ourselves in the light of God's word and saying, how do I stack up? Am I living my life to please myself? Or am I living my life because I want to please the Lord? Am I telling the Lord that I want His plan and purpose to be fulfilled in my life? Is that a part of my prayer? Or are my prayers all requests and appeals and calls for deliverance? What do we pray? What do we pursue? What do we seek? I think there's a great example here of the difference between pursuing our own agenda and letting God pursue His agenda through us. Well, now that we have Paul on land, we can take a breath. We'll pause and take our break.

When we come back, we're going to see what takes place here on this island of Malta over the course of the next three months.