This morning we will conclude our three-year journey through the book of Acts. Our text is Acts 28:11-30. Please stand as we read our concluding text together.

If you recall, Paul was placed on a ship from Caesarea in Palestine some time ago as a prisoner of Rome, destined to be tried by Caesar himself. However, the ship Paul was sailing on was eventually shipwrecked off the eastern coast of Malta (show map https://www.conformingtojesus.com/images/webpages/pauls_voyage_to_rome_map1.jpg), an island just south of Italy. We’ll pick up the story there beginning with vs. 11: After three months we set sail in a ship that had wintered in the island, a ship of Alexandria, with the twin gods as a figurehead.

We learn first that following the shipwreck, the passengers and crew remain on Malta for three months. Remember that the shipwreck likely took place toward the end of October, so scholars date Paul’s departure here in vs. 11 to be February of AD 60. Scholars also note that February would be the absolute earliest time of the year to venture a sea voyage in the ancient Mediterranean. Once again Paul, along with other prisoners of Rome, is placed on a ship from Alexandria, and as we’ve already observed, the Alexandrian grain ships were the largest, safest ships in the ancient Roman Empire (show pic of the ship). As was often the case in the ancient world, the ship’s bow was adorned with a figurehead, and in this case the figurehead was of the “Twin Gods”, Castor and Pollux (show pic of twin gods http://www.ninagryphon.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Castor-and-Pollux-1.jpeg).

Now, it is possible that Luke’s note about the figurehead is simply an observation that deserves little treatment, particularly for those of us in the 21st century. However, when we read the Bible, one of our goals is to understand the text within the perspective of the first century reader or “hearer” in many cases. So…if we lived in the first century Roman Empire, would the fact that Paul arrives in Rome on a ship donned with the figurehead of Castor and Pollux mean something to us? Yes…it most certainly would.

Castor and Pollux were highly celebrated “gods” within the Roman Empire. Their origin, like most of the Roman gods, comes from Greek mythology, and I won’t go deep into that history. However, just about every first century Roman would have known and revered Castor and Pollux. According to NT scholar Darrel Bock: “Castor and Pollux were especially popular in Egypt. Euripides (Electra 1342-55) saw them as guarding the truth and punishing perjurers, and so their mention may again underscore Paul’s innocence. They were seen as protectors of good fortune on the seas, being said to rid the seas of pirates and buccaneers.”

If you were to read the ancient play Electra written by Euripides, you would find this telling line attributed to the god Castor: The polluted we shall not help. Only those who cherish divine law
and justice in their life do we save, releasing them from great distress. So let no one willingly be unjust nor sail with the perjured. Euripides, *Electra* (1342-1355).

Paul’s survival of a shipwreck, his survival of a bite from a viper, and his arrival into Rome on a ship donned with the Twin Gods would have inevitably lead the first century audience to conclude that Paul could not possibly be a polluted perjurer...he must be innocent and favored by the gods. And they would be mostly right…except that Castor and Pollux are “make believe” god. The God who favors Paul and declares him to be justified is the one, true God and Creator of the universe. He is the Alpha and the Omega, and He has been accomplishing His purpose in Paul’s life for quite some time.

Alright, let’s pick up the story with vs. 12: “Putting in at Syracuse, we stayed there for three days. And from there we made a circuit and arrived at Rhegium. And after one day a south wind sprang up, and on the second day we came to Puteoli (Puzzoli) There we found brothers and were invited to stay with them for seven days. And so we came to Rome.”

OK, let’s pull up our trusty map and see where we are here (show map). Luke records that they left Malta and first traveled 60 miles to Syracuse where they stayed for three days. Then they head north/northeast to Rhegium, a 74 mile journey that apparently took some doing. (hide map) The phrase “made a circuit” is such a difficult translation that it can literally mean “we weighed anchor” to “we went around.” I think the point is that they battled unfavorable winds and likely had to tach back and forth before slowly making their way to Rhegium. They then enjoy a favorable wind from the south that makes short work (show map) of their 200 mile trip to Puteoli. (hide map) Luke records that some Christians in Puteoli invite them in, and given their strong relationship with the Roman centurion, Julius, they are allowed to reside with the Christian brothers for seven days. After a week of rest, they begin a five day journey to Rome on two well-used roads: the Campanian Way and the Appian Way (show map). Paul’s arrival into Rome draws some attention from the believers in the region, and Luke mentions that brothers from the Forum of Appias (43 miles south of Rome) and Three Taverns (21 miles from Rome) make their way up to Rome to visit Paul. (hide map) These visits made a huge impact on Paul’s state of mind. We read in vs. 15, “Paul thanked God and took courage.”

I want to pause for just a moment to restate something that is incredibly obvious throughout the book of Acts: Christians thrive in community. Relationships are paramount for those of us who follow Christ. God uses PEOPLE to bring us inspiration and encouragement. At first blush Paul might seem like a lone ranger, but when you study the book of Acts and Paul’s letters, what jumps out at you is that Paul is incredibly relational. He constantly mentions people by name; he constantly talks about how God has blessed him through friendships. He never travels alone. And once again, here in Acts 28, Paul gains courage and finds himself incredibly blessed through the time spent with other believers. Church…don’t miss this. If you are running on empty in your faith, I can almost guarantee that you are not spending regular, quality time with your brothers and sisters in the faith. Christianity is a communal sport! We simply can’t go it alone. Amen? Our group registration is still open today...many groups will get kicked off in the next week or so. I hope you will make a commitment to get connected in Christian community.
Alright…let’s pick up the story in vs. 16: And when we came into Rome, Paul was allowed to stay by himself, with the soldier who guarded him. Normal Roman protocol would have called for two guards, but Paul is assigned only one. He is not thrown into a prison cell, but instead is basically confined to “house arrest.” We learn at the end of the chapter that Paul stayed there for two years at his own expense and regularly had visitors. All of these clues suggest that Paul’s case was never considered a “risk to Rome,” and that in all likelihood, Paul’s case was either dismissed by Caesar or he was eventually acquitted. We’ll come back to that here in just a bit.

Now, Luke records that soon after Paul arrives in Rome, he sends for the Jewish leadership so that he can fulfill his mission to contend for Jesus in the Roman capital. Let’s pick up the story in vs. 17: 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, for with regard to this sect we know that everywhere it is spoken against.”

We’ve note several times throughout Acts that whenever Paul enters into a new city, he always seeks out the Jews in an effort to win new believers: first the Jews, then the Gentiles. We also get the sense that Paul wants to preemptively explain why he arrived in Rome as a prisoner. Remember: Paul has always desired to come to Rome to proclaim the gospel…he just never expected that he would arrive in Rome with a chain attached to his ankle. So Paul explains that he has been falsely accused by the Jews in Jerusalem, and that he has actually been arrested precisely because he has the Jew’s best interests in mind by proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Interestingly, the Jewish leaders in Rome state that they’ve heard nothing negative about Paul from the Jews in Judea, though they have heard negative things about this “sect” called Christianity. Some scholars suggest that the Jewish leaders here in Rome are lying…they find it unlikely that the Jewish leaders in Rome have not heard of Paul’s prior arrest in Jerusalem. Other scholars conclude that since Paul was locked away in a Palestinian prison for two years, the Jerusalem leadership simply moved on and didn’t bother to contact the Jewish leaders in Rome. Remember…communication between countries was a bit more challenging 2000 years ago than it is today!

I know some of you may be interested as to why the Jewish leaders claim that the Christian faith was supposedly “spoken against” throughout the empire. First of all, this is a classic case of the “pot calling the kettle black.” If any group of people was “spoken against everywhere” in the Roman Empire, it was the Jews. Because the Jews were so devoted to God and God alone, they
were a thorn-in-the-flesh within the polytheistic culture of the Romans. In fact, the Jews were expelled from Rome not once, not twice, but three times before Paul arrived there in AD 60. The Jews were expelled in 139 BC, again by Tiberius in 19 BC, and most recently by Claudius around AD 53. In the first century, the Romans made little distinction between the Jews and the Christians, so if “everywhere this sect is spoken against,” it’s first and foremost because the Christians were associated with the Jews!

So why were the Jews and the Christians spoken against? Believe it or not, the Romans thought the Christians were “atheists!” In other words, because they didn’t believe in “the gods,” they were “godless” people. Clearly that was not true, but that was the rumor. They were also seen to be “anti-Roman” because they claimed to serve a KING other than Caesar.

Though these Jewish leaders in Rome claim that Christianity is spoken against everywhere, they remain curious to hear Paul’s views, so we learn that a while later a rather large assembly of Jews gathers at Paul’s house for an all-day seminar on the claims of Christianity. Let’s pick up the story beginning with vs. 23: When they had appointed a day for him, they came to him at his lodging in greater numbers. 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.

Paul is being Paul. If his chains keep him from entering the synagogues, he will bring the synagogues to his house! So Paul does what Paul always does: he contends for the Gospel of Jesus Christ. He argues his case from scripture as we’ve seen him do time and again all over Asia Minor and Judea. And, as has been the case throughout the book of Acts, some believe, and most do not. As Kent Hughes writes: “The same fire that melts wax hardens clay.”

I can only imagine how frustrating it must have been for Paul at the end of this marathon seminar. Keep in mind that he spent two years in a Palestinian prison meditating upon God’s mandate that he must bear witness in Rome. Then he spent two weeks aboard a ship that was being tossed around by a hurricane. Then he was shipwrecked, bit by a snake, and delayed even longer before finally arriving into Rome as a prisoner without a formal charge! All of which led him FINALLY to this opportunity to present the Gospel to the Jews in Rome. After an entire day of contending, Paul sees that all-too-familiar glazed over look in the eyes of these Jewish authorities who should have understood that JESUS came as the MESSIAH…and yet they simply refuse to believe.

I suspect that frustration is what leads to Paul’s final “house clearing” comment that we find in vs. 25: 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 have 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.’”
Paul quotes Isaiah 6:9-10 and makes it clear that those in the room who reject Jesus are actually the very kind of people that Isaiah was writing about. They are those who are unwilling to hear the truth; they are those unwilling to look upon the truth...because if they listened and they perceived the truth, they would repent and God would heal them.

If that was not offensive enough, Paul then adds in vs. 28, “Therefore, let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.” Yep...that’ll do it! If you want to clear the room of all the Jews, simply tell them that God is redirecting his plan of salvation to the Gentiles because the Jews are too “dull” to get it. We get the sense that Paul is now too old to mince words or burn up his time with those who are determined NOT to believe. Paul acknowledges here what he has observed throughout his ministry and that which has been observable throughout the past 2000 years: the Jewish Messiah is more likely to be received by the Gentiles than by the Jews, as ironic and unbelievable as that may be.

Luke then concludes the book of Acts with these words in vs. 30: “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.”

Luke concludes his account with a very positive statement regarding Paul’s teaching and his influence for two years in Rome. For two years, we are left to imagine that Paul had a constant stream of visitors, most of whom were probably Gentiles, and that the Gospel spread through his teaching and proclamation. The fact that Paul taught and proclaimed with boldness is to his credit given the risk and his status as a prisoner; and the fact that he was able to do so without hindrance was due to his innocence and the generally benign environment of the Roman government in those particular years. Remember: Paul came to town with a host of Roman soldiers and a Centurion who by that time were likely pretty close friends.

Consequently, we learn from Paul’s letters that his ministry was actually very effective during these two years. For example, we read in Philippians 1:12-14: I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.

Paul also writes at the end of his letter, “The brothers who are with me greet you. All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar’s household.” Wow! Converts from Nero’s household? That is nothing short of astonishing! Clearly, God accomplished His purpose when he allowed Paul to be arrested and positioned in the capitol city as “beloved” prisoner of Rome! What a strategic position to influence the influencers, right? This situation reminds me of something our beloved Pastor Phil Truesdale used to say, “Look at that Jim...it’s almost like God knows what He’s doing!”

Now...did Paul get to testify before Caesar? Was he acquitted? Was he martyred? What happened after two years?
My official answer is: I can’t say for sure. Unfortunately, as the witness of scripture goes, I cannot say for certain what happens to Paul following the two year period that Luke writes about here at the end of chapter 28.

I can tell you that the VAST majority of scholars believe that Paul was acquitted at the end of two years either because he was tried and released, or because his case was simply dismissed due to a lack of interest.

When we look to some of the letters that Paul wrote during his two years in Rome, we get the sense that Paul was guardedly optimistic that he would be released. For example, in the book of Philippians Paul writes in 2:23, “I hope therefore to send [Timothy] just as soon as I see how it will go with me, and I trust in the Lord that shortly I myself will come also.”

Here and in other places Paul writes as though he expects to be acquitted.

However, when we read 2 Timothy, the picture is remarkably different. Paul laments that he is “suffering, bound in chains as a criminal.” He writes in chapter 4: “…for I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.”

These are not the words of a man who has any hope of being acquitted. These are the words of a man who knows that he will soon be executed. These textual clues lead scholars to believe 1) that Paul was released from Roman custody in the end of AD 62; but that 2) Paul is once again arrested, imprisoned, and due to Nero’s harsh persecution of Christians following the fire in Rome of AD 64; and 3) Paul is executed sometime in 67 or 68. (give some background about the fire and Nero)

Now, there are outside, extra-biblical sources that generally agree with what I just said. For example, Clement, who was a contemporary of Paul and who writes from Rome in the mid 90’s writes, Paul by his example pointed out the prize of patient endurance. After he had been seven times in bonds, had been driven into exile, had been stoned, had preached in the East and in the West, he won the noble renown which was the reward of his faith, having taught righteousness unto the whole world and having reached the farthest bounds of the West; and when he had borne his testimony before the rulers, so he departed from the world and went unto the holy place.

In the ancient first century, the phrase, “the farthest bounds of the West” was literally synonymous with the country of Spain. Most scholars understand Clement to say that Paul, following the two years that Luke mentions in Acts, goes to Spain as he had planned following his release from custody in AD 62/63.

Two generations later, (c. AD180), the anonymous writer of the MURATORIAN CANON gives the following account of the Acts of the Apostles: 'Luke comprises in detail in his treatise addressed to the most excellent Theophilus the incidents in the lives of the Apostles of which he was an eye witness. As he does not mention either the martyrdom of Peter, or the journey of Paul to Spain, it is clear that these took place in his absence.'
Eusibius, an early Christian historian who wrote in AD 325 writes, “And Luke, who wrote the Acts of the Apostles, brought his history to a close at this point, after stating that Paul spent two whole years at Rome as a prisoner at large, and preached the word of God without restraint. Thus after he had made his defense it is said that the apostle was sent again upon the ministry of preaching, and that upon coming to the same city a second time he suffered martyrdom.”

So…if Paul lived beyond the two years in prison at Rome, and if Paul in fact traveled to Spain, why didn’t Luke write about it? I don’t know. Luke may have intended to write more but then died before he had the opportunity. Luke may have chosen to end his account there because he didn’t want to include the martyrdom of Paul given the discouragement that would have spread among the early church. We don’t know, but I think it’s MOST likely that Paul was released after two years, continued his ministry, and then was arrested again following the fire of Rome in AD 64 and subsequently martyred along with hundreds of other Christians.

So—there you have it—the book of Acts has come to an end. Our series on Acts has come to an end. But the STORY of ACTS is still being written…you get that, right? The STORY of ACTS is about how the Holy Spirit moves in ordinary people to accomplish extraordinary signs and wonders that leads to the growth of Christ’s Church and the expansion of God’s Kingdom. That story is still being written all over the world, and that story is still being written right here in Kansas City! We are the Acts 29 church! We are the ongoing story of what the Holy Spirit is still doing right now…and here’s what we know: this is nothing new. The Holy Spirit continues to work today as in the days of Peter and Paul. The gospel continues to be proclaimed…some believe, many do not. Christians continue to suffer imprisonment and even martyrdom, but their testimonies cannot be silenced. The Kingdom of God continues to advance into every corner of the globe as the Bride of Christ is assembled. Wherever there is worship in spirit and in truth, wherever believers love each other in authentic Christian community, wherever the Gospel is spread through hard work, perseverance, generosity, and proclamation…there you will find the Holy Spirit at work…just as in the days of old.

Church, this is our story. We are the Peter’s and the Paul’s, the Lydia’s and the Priscilla’s of the 21st century. To us has been entrusted the truth and the power of the Gospel. We are now those who Jesus referred to as the Light of the World. We are those who have been commissioned to be Christ’s witnesses in our city, our nation, and to the ends of the earth. We are those who are blessed with the fellowship of the believers, and we are those called to endure shipwrecks and persecution so that the gospel might advance.

This story lives on…and guest what? There’s a chapter in here with your name on it. I wonder: what will it say? How will your life…how will my life…how will the fellowship of this assembly be remembered hundreds, even thousands of years from now? Will we be known as those who were filled with the Holy Spirit? Will we be remembered as those who were bold in our proclamation and willing to endure suffering for the name of Jesus? Will be those who fought the good fight and finished the race?

I hope so. But whatever posterity might think of me, or you, or this church, I simply hope and pray that God would be glorified…amen? To God be the glory. Let’s pray.