

TO THE JEW, FIRST!

Acts 28:11-31

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Eleven days ago on December 24, 2015, there was a news article in the *Israel Today* news magazine entitled, “Orthodox Rabbis Bring Jesus Home for Christmas.” I couldn’t believe what I was reading! The opening two paragraphs said:

More than twenty-five prominent rabbis from Israel and abroad recently issued a statement calling for a renewed look at Jesus, Christians, and the New Testament faith. Quoting from their own sages, these outstanding Orthodox rabbis are not ashamed to exalt the name of Jesus, welcoming the carpenter from Nazareth back into the Jewish fold.

“Jesus brought a double goodness to the world,” declare the group of well-known rabbis. “On the one hand he strengthened the Torah of Moses majestically . . . and not one of our sages spoke out more emphatically concerning the immutability of the Torah, and on the other hand, he removed idols from the nations.”

The article continues:

What we are now witnessing is the undoing of 2,000 years of Jewish rejection and animosity towards Jesus, a miracle by any estimation. For the out and out refusal by Jews to accept Jesus is slowly, but surely, coming to an end, as growing numbers of prestigious Orthodox rabbis

welcome Jesus back. . . . Two thousand years of Christian antisemitism, crusades, inquisitions, and the Holocaust cannot keep the Star of Bethlehem from rising again in Israel. This call by these distinguished rabbis to embrace Christians as “brothers and sisters” is no less a miracle. For Jews to accept Christians with such endearment, after so much misunderstanding and antisemitic ugliness can only be understood as a divine work of heavenly grace, the likes of which I find unfathomable.

And I personally agree. This is amazing. However, lest we raise our expectations too high, let me remind you that these rabbis do not hold the majority opinion. Still today, the majority of rabbis would be upset by this article. It would have been blasphemous to them. Yet, this small group of rabbis’ declaration is a huge step forward in removing a barrier that has stood between Jew and Christian for too long.

All of this reminds me personally of how my last trip to Israel taught me to read the Scriptures first through the eyes of a Jew and then through the eyes of a non-Jew. For the Scriptures were written by Jews with a predominant expectation of Jewish readers as the audience. Even as we return to our final study in the book of **Acts**, our passage for this morning zeroes in on our calling, as believers today, to not overlook or forget that the Gospel was and is to be “**to the Jew first and then to the Gentile.**” Before my trip to Israel, I did not give much consideration to intentionally praying for Jews and for effectual Jewish evangelism in Israel and around the world. But now I do. Do you?

As we return to our study this morning, I would challenge you to keep that question of your intentional commitment to reaching the Jew for Jesus in the back of your mind.

Last week we touched on the opening verses that record Paul's arrival in Italy and his arrival in Rome. Let's revisit those verses, beginning with **Acts 28:11**.

¹¹At the end of three months we set sail on an Alexandrian ship which had wintered at the island, and which had the Twin Brothers for its figurehead. ¹²After we put in at Syracuse, we stayed there for three days. ¹³From there we sailed around and arrived at Rhegium, and a day later a south wind sprang up, and on the second day we came to Puteoli. ¹⁴There we found some brethren and were invited to stay with them for seven days; and thus we came to Rome. And the brethren [meaning the Jewish Christians in Rome], when they heard about us, came from there as far as the Market of Appius and Three Inns to meet us; and when Paul saw them, he thanked God and took courage. ¹⁶When we entered Rome, Paul was allowed to stay by himself with the soldier who was guarding him.

When he first touched Italian soil, Paul landed at the port of Puteoli. Julius, the Roman Centurion who was responsible for the delivery of all of the prisoners to Rome, was gracious to Paul, because of all that Paul had done for the ship's morale and safe arrival thus far. Specifically, Julius allowed Paul to spend seven days with some Jewish Christians living in Puteoli. How he found them we are not told. Paul had never been to Italy before, and we have no knowledge of any Roman Christian Jews or non-Jews who knew who he was. But they were excited, nonetheless, to finally meet and spend time with the author of the letter to the Romans that the Apostle had penned five years earlier. What a joy it must have been for Paul to meet these believers and to

Speak to them about Jesus. Sometime during their seven day stay at Puteoli, word was sent to Christians in Rome that Paul had arrived. Immediately, several Jewish Christians left Rome to meet up with Paul.

At the end of that time, Julius, his soldiers, and prisoners Paul, Luke, and Aristarchus traveled north to the city of Rome, seventy miles away. On the way, they were surprised to meet Christians at the Market of Appias, which was known for being a rather rough and tumble place, unsafe for the vulnerable traveler. There was not a lot of law and order there. Hence, they probably did not spend the night, but traveled north another ten miles to the Three Inns, where they were greeted by another group of Christians coming to welcome Paul. The Three Inns was not only a place to sleep, but a place to do some shopping.

When Paul met the brothers from Rome, he began to thank God and took courage as he continued on his journey. He realized that God was true to his word by sending him to the capital of the Roman Empire. Furthermore, he must have been touched that these believers had done more for him than what he had asked of them five years earlier in his letter to the Romans, in **15:31-32**, to “**pray for his safe travel to Rome.**” They actually greeted him and escorted him into the city. These are the only verses in **Acts** that mention Roman Christians.

Keep in mind that Julius, the Roman official overseeing the transportation of all of the prisoners from Palestine to Rome, was still in charge when Paul arrived. Unlike for the other prisoners, Julius made special arrangements for Paul, a Roman citizen, to be separated and to have his own personal guard. In **verse 30**, Luke tells us that Paul lived in a house he rented for the duration of his imprisonment in Rome, namely two years. It was there that he stayed under “**house arrest.**” I imagine that the Christians in Rome and other places paid the rent and supplied Paul’s food, clothing, and other necessities.

We pick up the action at **verse 17**, where Paul is about to meet for the first time with the Jewish non-Christian leaders in Rome. Keep in mind that from what we read later in this passage, apparently there had been no evangelistic outreach to the Jews in Rome. Neither the Gentiles nor fellow Jews had reached out to the Jews with the news of the Gospel.

We read:

¹⁷After three days Paul called together those who were the leading men of the Jews, and when they came together, he began saying to them, “Brethren, 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. ¹⁸And when they had examined me, they were willing to release me because there was no ground for putting me to death. ¹⁹But when the Jews objected, I was forced to appeal to Caesar, not that I had any accusation against my nation. ²⁰For this reason, therefore, I requested to see you and to speak with you, for I am wearing this chain for the sake of the hope of Israel.”

Who were these Jewish leaders? On the basis of information provided by Roman and Jewish historiographers, Suetonius, Tacitus, and Josephus, we can estimate that at this time, as many as 40,000 Jews lived in Rome. From inscriptions on ruins, we know that there were at least ten synagogues in Rome with influential leaders. [Kistemaker, S. J., & Hendriksen, W. (1953–2001). *Exposition of the Acts of the Apostles* (Vol. 17, p. 957). Grand Rapids: Baker Book House.] It was Paul’s plan to get together with these leaders as quickly as possible to help answer any questions they may have had concerning his imprisonment. So, the first thing Paul did, three days after his arrival in Rome, was to send out an invitation to meet with the local influential Jewish leadership.

His second objective in meeting with the Jewish leadership was in keeping with his usual practice, as set forth in **Romans 1:16**, which was to set the

stage for presenting the gospel “**first to the Jew and then to the Greek.**”

From **verses 17-22**, we can make several noteworthy observations about this first encounter. The first is found in **verse 17**, where Paul addressed these leaders as “**brothers,**” which was a common greeting in Jewish circles. By this greeting, Paul intimated that he, a fellow Jew, was their brother. He was telling them, “I am part of our people. I am one of you.”

Secondly, he vowed that he had done nothing wrong against the Jewish people or their customs. Paul declared that although he was innocent of any wrongdoing, the Jews in Jerusalem nevertheless handed him over to the Romans as a prisoner.

Thirdly, though he had been manhandled and almost killed by the Jerusalem mob and harshly dealt with by the Jewish authorities, there was no sign of Paul’s being bitter for the injustices he had suffered. He simply gave them the facts without any accusations about their motives. For example, there was no mention of the high priest’s treachery and continued attempts to take his life. Paul wisely refrained from accusing the Jews in Jerusalem of treating him unjustly. He consciously and deliberately avoided any negative remarks about those back home, so that he was able to gain the goodwill of these leaders with the hope that they would be more receptive to the Gospel when they come together at the next meeting.

Fourth, Paul even had a kind word for the Romans, saying that they examined him in a trial and were unable to find him guilty of any crime that deserved the death sentence. Nor did he reflect critically on his treatment by Felix and Festus. In fact, he praised the Romans for seeking to free him. In an effort to advance the cause of the gospel, Paul wished to avoid any hint of confrontation between himself and either the Jews or the Romans.

By the way, when Paul mentioned that he appealed to Caesar, he indirectly revealed that he was a Roman citizen. He also implied that, being innocent, he looked forward to a trial in the presence of Caesar.

Furthermore, in **verse 19**, Paul emphatically asserted that his appeal to Caesar was not because he sought to bring any accusation against the Jews as a

nation. With this statement, he assured the Jewish leaders in Rome that he would not cause them trouble. He would be true to his people and present no accusation against them in court. He was a loyal Jew in every respect. Just as he was not guilty of any crime against the Jews, so he was innocent of any ill intent toward them. They had falsely accused him. He would make no accusations against them.

Fifthly, Paul finally stated his purpose in coming to Rome and inviting them, as well as other Jewish leaders in Rome, to meet with him--to speak to them about the “**Hope of Israel**,” which was a well-known Jewish reference to the coming of their Messiah, who had promised to establish His Kingdom on earth. Paul told the Jewish leaders that the cause for his being chained and under house arrest was rooted in this, their common hope, “**the Hope of Israel**.” In a subsequent meeting, which we will get to in a moment, Paul would introduce the Messianic teaching concerning Jesus the Messiah.

Not really sure how to reply, the Jewish leaders responded in **verse 21**. They said to him:

We have neither received letters from Judea concerning you, nor have any of the brethren come here and reported or spoken anything bad about you. ²²But we desire to hear from you what your views are; for concerning this sect, it is known to us that it is spoken against everywhere.

The Jewish leaders had an open mind to hear what Paul had to say about their Messiah. Hence, they accepted Paul’s offer to speak. At this point, their minds were not prejudiced against Paul or anything he would have to say. Keep in mind, too, that Paul’s ship was among the first to arrive after winter, so Jews in Jerusalem and Caesarea had had little chance to communicate with their counterparts in Rome.

That's what made the recent news article I quoted so historical. This may be the first time in 2,000 years, since Paul met with these men, that Jewish leaders were open to hear what Paul had to say about their Messiah.

However in the past, they had received some word about a Jewish "sect" that hadn't been spoken very highly of. So, being as Paul was a highly intelligent, world traveled rabbi as well as a Roman citizen, they wanted to hear his views on this sect as well.

It might be helpful for you to know that when these Jewish leaders used the word "sect," they did not mean it to be derogatory. It simply meant "party" or "school of thought." For instance, this same term is used to describe the Sadducees and the Pharisees. It was not always equated with a heretical Jewish group. Hence, while the Pharisees and Sadducees had discussions about various differences in their beliefs, they did not outright reject the other.

Evidently, Paul's response to their concern about this sect was, "Well, you make a good point. Why don't we get together again and talk about that? I'll tell you all I know." And they set a day to get together and listen to Paul. Hence, that day for the second meeting, which involved more of the Jewish leadership in Rome than the first, came next, beginning with **verse 23**. We read:

When they had set a day for Paul, they came to him at his lodging in large numbers; and he was explaining to them by solemnly testifying about the kingdom of God and trying to persuade them concerning Jesus, from both the Law of Moses and from the Prophets, from morning until evening.

That typically meant from sunrise to sunset. Hence, Paul preached and discussed the Gospel all day. This was no brief meeting. Paul didn't particularly care how long the meeting went; he wasn't going anywhere. But for the others to stay that long suggests that there were some serious discussions being heard that day.

We read on.

²⁴Some were being persuaded by the things spoken, but others would not believe. ²⁵And when they did not agree with one another, they began leaving after Paul had spoken one parting word, [which was aimed at those who were leaving.] The Holy Spirit rightly spoke through Isaiah the prophet to your fathers.

Note the words “**your fathers.**” This expression was meant to cause those who were leaving to pause and to reflect on the seriousness of their all-day discussion. It was a well-used expression by the Old Testament prophet Isaiah to point to his contemporaries who were living in rebellion against God. In **Acts 7** it was used by Stephen just before he was stoned, distancing himself from those who had rejected the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Stephen, like the Apostle Paul in this context back in **verse 17**, began his speech to the Jews speaking of “**our fathers.**” But when they turned their backs on the Gospel, Stephen no longer spoke of “**our fathers**” but of “**your fathers.**” This means that they had joined the company of their unbelieving predecessors. Paul was doing the same thing here; he was giving a warning or signal to these Jewish leaders that to reject the Gospel was to reject God. At the same time, Paul was separating himself from those who rejected God’s Word, with clear warning from Isaiah.

However, to go one step further, Paul deliberately attributed the word he spoke not to the prophet Isaiah, but to the Holy Spirit, emphasizing the authority that supported his point of view was equal to the primary author of Scripture. If the Jews who were leaving rejected the Scriptures, they not only were spurning Isaiah but also were defying the Holy Spirit. In his Word, God had given them the Messianic prophecies and had sent his servant Paul to explain to them that Jesus fulfilled these prophecies. When the Jews received all the evidence and then refused to accept the truth of God’s Word, they were defying the living God.

It's only after having said that that Paul quotes Isaiah in **verse 26** saying:

Go to this people and say, “You will keep on hearing but will not understand; and you will keep on seeing but will not perceive; ²⁷for the heart of this people has become dull, and with their ears they scarcely hear, and they have closed their eyes; otherwise they might see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and return, and I would heal them.”

The Jews in Rome knew that Paul quoted from **Isaiah 6:9-10** and were familiar with the historical setting of these words. They understood that God told Isaiah to go to the Israelites whose hearts were hardened because of unbelief and disobedience. They knew that the divine words spoken by Isaiah only drove the people of Israel further away from salvation.

That's why Paul added what he did in **verse 28**. **“Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will also listen.”**

The verb “to hear” or “to listen” occurs five times and at key points in this passage. The first occurrence is when the Roman Jews expressed their desire to “**hear**” Paul's views (**verse 22**). But when they had heard his testimony, it became clear that they had not really heard him, because they responded in disbelief and rejection. The quote from Isaiah refers to “**hearing**” three times, and its whole point is that hearing is not really hearing at all if the message is not acted upon. Finally, in **verse 28**, Paul referred to hearing one last time; and it is the last, emphatic word of the entire passage. But in this case, it would not be the Jews who would hear/believe, but the Gentiles. They would listen with responsive hearts. They would hear and receive the gospel.

I imagine that there were more fence sitters who had not yet left, but when they heard Paul's bold statement, they made one of two choices--to at that

moment get up and leave with the others, or stay put and learn more about the Gospel.

To some it appears that the book of **Acts** ends on a negative note of unbelieving Jews refusing to accept the gospel. But I don't see it that way. To me, the last words from Luke are positive. Luke concludes the book with these words:

²⁹When he had spoken these words, the Jews departed, having a great dispute among themselves. ³⁰And he stayed two full years in his own rented quarters and was welcoming all [Jews and Gentile] who came to him, ³¹preaching the kingdom of God and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness, unhindered.

“Unhindered” means that Paul had no restrictions laid upon him by the government of Rome, preventing him from preaching and teaching the Gospel. The content of Paul's message forms the conclusion to the message of Acts. He preached **“the kingdom of God”** and taught about **“the Lord Jesus Christ.”**

For just a moment, think about Paul's ministry from prison and its impact on the Gentile world. I am sure that while Paul lived in his house with a soldier guarding him that his daily conversation was not about the weather. Instead, he introduced the soldier to Jesus Christ, taught him the truths of Christ's gospel, and instilled in him a saving knowledge of Jesus. As in any army, a soldier in the Roman army was frequently transferred. If we assume that the soldier who guarded Paul became a Christian and was posted to another part of the Roman Empire, Paul would indeed be sending forth a missionary.

How many soldiers guarded Paul in that two-year period? And how many missionaries did Paul send into the world? We are not told, but we are confident that Paul's rented house in Rome indeed became mission headquarters.

Besides the gentile guards that watched Paul in shifts, there were people from all classes, Gentile and Jew, coming to the imprisoned Paul with questions about Jesus. Furthermore, Paul wrote several letters from Rome.

Finally, consider the Scriptural evidence of what was happening in Rome five years after Paul's death. Probably just before the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, the epistle to the Hebrews was addressed to the Jewish Christians in Rome. This Jewish Christian congregation was the result of Paul's two years stay there.

So, as we step back and look at our study of **Acts**, what can we take away? Well, it is obvious, that **Acts** is preeminently a book about evangelism. We see throughout it that the calling and purpose of every believer is to be an ambassador of Jesus Christ, delivering the message of the King, the Gospel.

As we look at Paul's example of being an ambassador for Christ, what can we learn? The following are several principles of evangelism we can draw from Paul's example:

As an ambassador of Christ, Paul did not allow bitterness from past injustices against him to poison his message of hope in Christ. Remember, most of the injustices Paul experienced came at the hands of Jews who were his brethren.

I have met many a pastor who has been wounded in ministry. In fact, I have met none who have ministered for five or more years who haven't been wounded. And as the old saying goes, Christians are known for shooting their own wounded! As a result, those pastors can either withdraw from the ministry because they were so hurt, carry a grudge and a chip on their shoulder throughout their ministry career, bringing it to a quick halt, or chose to forgive and move on.

But this isn't just true of pastors; it's true of many believers in the church today. I read an article recently that gave some statistics of Christians who no longer attend church, but worship at home because of some past offense they witnessed or personally suffered at church. How many people do you know who have quit going to church because they or someone near them was treated unfairly? Unfortunately, we know too many.

But Paul knew all about that kind of injustice, up close and personal. He writes about it in his letters to Timothy and the church at Ephesus. In **Ephesians 6**, he reminds the Christians that their battle is not against “**flesh and blood**,” meaning people. To be specific, I believe he means Christians who hurt Christians. Why do I say that? Because all of **Ephesians 5** speaks to the various relationships of Christians to Christians. But before you even begin with **chapter 5**, the last verses of **chapter 4** state:

³⁰Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. ³¹Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. ³²Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.

Note the “**one another**” and “**each other**.” Those two terms in Greek refer to “others of the same kind.” In the context, this means Paul is speaking to Christians, people of the same kind, and how they are to relate to one another in their churches. We Christians are not to carry grudges into our church settings or away from our church settings. If anyone had a reason to bear a grudge, Paul did. But he wasn’t a grudge bearer. He forgave others and carried about him the sweet aroma of Christ, which drew others to the Savior. That’s one reason he was such an effective ambassador for Christ. He was winsome in his ways, not a sour puss! Don’t poison the message of the gospel with your own bitterness.

Secondly, Paul teaches us by his example that one should be ready to share the good news of Christ whenever and wherever there is opportunity. He wasn’t in Rome three days before he was inviting people to meet with him to hear the Gospel. Whether in prison, on a ship at sea, on an island in the bedroom of a diseased man, or on a beach after having been bitten by a snake, he was alert to letting others know about Jesus.

Something else we learned from **verses 23** and **31** is that Paul preached a Biblically accurate Gospel. He didn't water down the truth. It was scripturally right on, supported by both the Old and New Testaments.

Jesus taught his disciples to be ready in season and out of season to give an answer for their faith. Likewise, according to **verse 23**, the Apostle Paul preached tirelessly. If people wanted to listen to Paul talk about Jesus all day, Paul would talk to them about Jesus all day.

Finally, Paul preached to everyone. He preached to two governors who had held him in prison. He preached to Roman centurions. He preached to ship captains, fellow prisoners, and those who guarded him. He preached to the religious and the non-religious. He preached to complete strangers. He preached to Jews and non-Jews. In **verse 30** we are told that he "**welcomed all**" to his house of arrest and would speak boldly to them about Jesus.

The apostle Paul never forgot his roots or Jesus' commission to go first to Jerusalem and ultimately to the uttermost parts of the earth. Paul preached to the Jew first and then to the Gentile.

We are living in exciting times. We have opportunities all around us. Even with the ranks of atheists beginning to swell in number, we simply have more opportunity to live and speak the Gospel out before others. But in doing so, let's never forget the Jews. For it was through them that we received the written Word of God as well as the living, in the flesh Word of God who dwelt among us and gave His life for us.