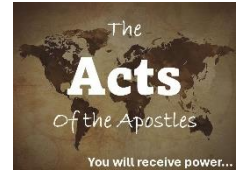




# The Fire, the Snake, and the Sovereignty of God

## Acts 28:1-28:31

### (Lesson #36)



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#### 14-point outline of Chapter 28:

- 1) After surviving the shipwreck, the group reached Malta. The locals showed kindness by building a fire to warm them from the cold and rain (28:1–2).
- 2) While helping gather wood, Paul was bitten by a venomous snake. He calmly shook it off into the fire without harm (28:3).
- 3) The islanders initially thought Paul was a criminal being punished by divine justice. When he remained unharmed, they changed their minds and thought he was a god (28:4–6).
- 4) Publius, the chief official of the island, welcomed Paul and his companions and hosted them for three days (28:7).
- 5) Paul healed Publius' sick father through prayer and laying on of hands. This led to many others on the island coming to be healed (28:8–9).
- 6) When it was time to leave, the islanders honored Paul and his group and provided what they needed for their journey (28:10).
- 7) After three months, they boarded an Alexandrian ship that had wintered on the island. They sailed to Italy, stopping at several ports along the way (28:11–14).
- 8) As Paul approached Rome, believers came from the city to meet and encourage him (28:15).
- 9) In Rome, Paul was allowed to live by himself, though under constant guard (28:16).
- 10) After three days in Rome, Paul invited the local Jewish leaders to explain his situation and the reasons for his imprisonment (28:17–20).
- 11) The leaders had received no negative reports about Paul but were curious to hear more about the Christian movement (28:21–22).
- 12) A large group of Jews gathered to hear Paul teach about the Kingdom of God and Jesus as the Messiah. Some believed, while others did not (28:23–24).
- 13) Seeing their division, Paul quoted Isaiah 6, declaring that the prophecy applied to them. He then announced that the message of salvation would go to the Gentiles (28:25–28).
- 14) The book concludes with Paul living in Rome for two years, boldly and freely preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ (28:30–31).

**28:1 After we were brought safely through, we then learned that the island was called Malta.**

We can imagine, as all of the people arrived on the shore of the island, how amazed they were that everyone survived. Luke describes it as, after we were brought safely through.

**APPLICATION:** God has never promised that he would deliver us from tribulation, from distress. But like Paul, God has promised He will deliver us through the difficulty, through the trial.

**Consider** Joseph, Daniel, and Paul. Just to name three. Delivered from problems? NO. Delivered through problems? YES!

**Back to our story.** As the people in general and the soldiers in particular learned that all 276 people had survived the shipwreck, along the way, they also learned that this was the island of Malta and Paul's words, which were nothing more than God's promise had been fulfilled, namely all the people on the ship would survive.

As you heard in the video presentation, Malta was a bustling port city south of Sicily. It is weird indeed that the sailors did not recognize the island.

*Vs 2 - The native people showed us unusual kindness, for they kindled a fire and welcomed us all, because it had begun to rain and was cold.*

Those natives who lived on the island showed us unusual kindness. The Greek tense for showed kindness is imperfect active, which means they kept being very kind.

The Luke records that they kindled a fire and welcomed them, we would assume all 276 of them.

They did this at least in part because it had begun to rain and it was cold. Again, our best understanding is that it is now mid-October.

*Vs 3-4 - 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. 4 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."*

The island locals kindled a fire, and Paul went and collected a bunch, of sticks, and put them on the fire.

When he did this, a viper came out of the pile of materials that was burning, due to the heat that was generated, and latched onto Paul's hand.

In the verses that follow, we will see that the locals draw two conclusions about Paul based on circumstances they saw. Both of these conclusions were wrong. I say this because we can do the same thing.

#### **Vs 4 – The First Conclusion:**

When the island natives saw the snake hanging from Paul's hand, they looked and said to one another: There is **no doubt** (it is obvious) this **man is a murderer** and although he was able to escape the sea, **justice has not allowed him to live**.

Now that is weirdly worded. The Greek word translated justice is **δίκη (dike)** and this is likely a reference to the Greek goddess of justice (Dike), not letting Paul go unpunished.

More than bad theology about a false god, this is also **their first, incorrect conclusion**.

**We hear people say similar things** all the time when something bad happens to someone:

- He had it coming
- Karma
- Divine justice
- Etc.

*Vs 5-6 - He, however, shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm. 6 They were waiting for him to swell up or suddenly fall down dead. But when they had waited a long time and saw no misfortune come to him, they changed their minds and said that he was a god.*

Paul shook the snake off into the fire suffering **no immediate harm**.

**Vs 6** - The natives watched Paul, waiting for his body to start responding to the snake bite, swell up, and then he would fall down suddenly dead!

The Greek verb waiting is the imperfect active, which indicates they **kept waiting**, they **kept expecting**.

They waited a long time and yet nothing happened, no misfortune came upon Paul, and then they changed their minds and said that Paul was a god.

Here we see their **SECOND INCORRECT CONCLUSION**:

**Since nothing bad happened he must be a god.**

Since this person has money, nice home, nice car, nice life, they must either be a good Christian, or if we believe they are lost, then we can conclude God does not really care how we live.

These are all similar and incorrect conclusions.

**There is a faulty premise that underlies all of this thinking** and it is this: If something bad happens it is always because of sin and if good things come a person's way, it is always because they are pleasing God.

I hope all of us in this room have matured enough in our faith to recognize neither of these conditions are always true.

By the way this is the second time that Paul has been mistaken for a god. Remember what happened in Lystra (Ac 14:8-13).

**OHHH, in passing Paul was a guilty murdered, but God's justice had been served in Christ, and if you are a believer the same is true for you.**

By the way, the ultimate serpent at the cross, struck Jesus on the heel, and Jesus crushed that serpent's head on our behalf! At Calvary, divine justice has been satisfied!

But here the locals on Malta are now saying Paul is a god.

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*Vs 7 - Now in the neighborhood 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.*

Now in the same neighborhood the Greek word is **τόπος (topos)**, it means the **same place**, the **same area**, the **same city or village**. In that same area were lands that belonged to the chief of the island.

The Greek describes him as the **πρῶτος (protos), tes, νῆσος (nesos)**. Literally **the first man of the island**.

The first man of the island was a man named Publius, his name was Greek and he was the chief of the island.

Notice Luke records that Publius **received us** and he **entertained us** and **showed us hospitality** for three days.

**APPLICATION:** Just as a reminder, believers are to show hospitality to strangers (Heb 13:1-2).

Back to our text, clearly Luke is among the **us**. What we are not sure is how many are among the us. Does the us here include all 276 souls that were saved?

**Is so, this was massive hospitality!**

*Vs 8 - 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.*

**Ger notes:** This illness was called "**Maltese fever**" was similar to malaria and was "**characterized by recurrent fever and dysentery, caused by a microbe in the milk of the indigenous goats.**"

The word of Publius' father's illness made it to Paul and Paul visited him, prayed for him, and putting his hands on him, he healed him.

God heard Paul's prayer and healed this Gentile man.

*Vs 9 - And when this had taken place, the rest of the people on the island who had diseases also came and were cured.*

When the locals learned what had taken place, they all started bringing those who were sick with diseases and they were cured.

Once again, we see this very special power to heal that existed with the apostles and their immediate associates, and in particular with Paul.

Let me show you something cool. The verb translated “cured” here in verse 9 is not the same word as healed in vs 8.

Paul put his hands on Publius’ dad and he was healed. Then people came from around the island, and they were cured.

**Many scholars believe that this second curing** was via medicines as administered by Dr. Luke.

Of course, we can never be sure, but it is interesting that two different Greek words are used here.

It may be that we see God’s amazing healing power and we see people possibly healed through medicine. Yet all were cured by a sovereign God.

***Vs 10 - They also honored us greatly, and when we were about to sail, they put on board whatever we needed.***

Luke records that the locals **honored us** greatly. For sure, they honored Paul and Luke.

**OBSERVATION:** It seems during the time on Malta, the Roman soldiers, the other prisoners, and even Julius (the centurion) slid off into the background.

We are not told the details of how the centurion secured another ride for the 276 people. Only that he did, and the people of the island honored Paul and for sure Luke (greatly) and when they were getting ready to depart Malta, they put them onboard **providing for them whatever they needed.**

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***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.***

Finally, after three months they set sail. If we assume they were shipwrecked about mid to late October. Then it seems it would have been **around February when they left the island of Malta.**

Winter is now over and traveling on the Mediterranean is once again safe.

Luke records that they boarded and sailed on a ship that had wintered in the harbor, likely in one of the bays of Malta. But not likely in the bay where they landed for there was no mention of any ships and it is unlikely any were traveling on the Mediterranean later in the year.

We are likely correct in assuming this was another bay, where one or more ships had wintered.

Like the ship that Paul and the others had been on, that had run aground and at least partially been destroyed in the bay. This ship was also a ship of Alexandria, so it was from the same fleet and was likely a grain freighter.

Then Luke records an additional detail that it had “the twin gods” as a figurehead. The Twin brothers in Greek mythology were Castor and Pollux, the sons of Jupiter and Leda. They were known together as Dioscuri. In Latin the twins are known as Gemini. These twins were regarded as the patrons of sailors.

**The Greek word translated “figurehead” is παράσημος (parasemos),** is a hapax legomenon. It is used only here, but it means **to be marked.**

**Fruchtenbaum wrote that** “their images were often painted or carved on each side of the prow of the ship.”

That is likely what was going on with this ship.

***Vs 12 - Putting in at Syracuse, we stayed there for three days.***

Luke records that the group sailed from Malta to Syracuse, and there in Syracuse they stayed three days.

Situated on the east coast of Sicily, Syracuse is roughly 80 miles north of Malta.

***Vs 13 - 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.***

Further Luke records that from there they made a circuit. **The Greek word means to stroll, to wonder.**

So, it seems to imply they did not take a straight course, and it is unclear as to why they did not. But ultimately, they arrived at Rhegium.

After one day a south wind sprang up and on the second day, they came Puteoli. **From Rhegium to Puteoli is about 200 miles.**

***Vs 14 - There we found brothers and were invited to stay with them for seven days. And so we came to Rome.***

Luke then records that **in Puteoli**, they found believers “brothers.” This is one of the many names we find in the book of Acts to identify believers, this one highlights the familial relationship.

They found brothers there in Puteoli who invited them, we cannot be sure who they are, nor is it clear where all the Roman soldiers and other prisoners are at this time.

But fellow believers invited them to stay. It appears that Julius the Centurion is giving Paul great freedom!

**Keep in mind**, Paul wrote the **epistle to the Romans**, roughly 3 years earlier, on the third missionary journey, by now, many believers know who Paul is, although they have never met him.

Luke then writes; **thus we came to Rome.**

Now they have not actually arrived in Rome, but they are in Italy and their time traveling by ship, at least on this journey, is over.

**WHILE WE ARE ON IT.** Rome was the capital city of roughly 2500 miles from east to west and 2300 miles north to south with an estimated population of 45 million, estimates are that roughly 1/3 were slaves.

***Vs 15 - And the brothers there, when they heard about us, came as far as the Forum of Appius and Three Taverns to meet us. On seeing them, Paul thanked God and took courage.***

The brothers there... Now think about this, no single person is mentioned as taking the gospel to Rome, this church grew up organically.

These brothers in Rome, heard that Paul and his traveling companion(s) (for sure Luke, we are not sure about Aristarchus) were there and a group of them made the trip from Rome to the **Forum of Appius** and to **Three Taverns** to meet “us”.

So, two meeting places where fellow believers came to meet Paul. First the Forum or Market of Appius. This was roughly **40 miles** southeast on the **Appian Way**.

**The Appian Way, or Via Appia was one of the earliest and likely the most famous of ancient Roman roads.**

It was built in 312 B.C. It spanned a total of 350 miles (563 km). Large stones made up the bulk of its construction, and softer gravel that was compacted between the rocks cemented it.

Three Taverns, was also located on the Appian Way, approximately **30 miles** southeast of Rome.

**These believers walked between 30 to 40 miles to meet the apostle, Paul!**

Again, clearly Luke is still with Paul, and we can imagine that Paul's arrival in Italy would have created a lot of excitement with the believers in Rome.

No doubt by now, Paul's name and reputation are known throughout the Christian world.

Notice, on seeing these brothers who traveled to meet with Paul, and he was making the journey from **Puteoli** to Rome, Luke tells us that **Paul thanked God and took courage**.

**APPLICATION: Again, we have talked about this in various ways, but our faith is contagious, in a very positive sense, to other Christians.**

Paul was encouraged that these other believers upon hearing he was in the area came out to meet him. Paul was encouraged that God had fulfilled his promise to him. Paul is in Rome.

**Now is a good time to remind ourselves** of Paul's great desire to go to Rome and preach the gospel there (Rom 15:22-24, 28, 29).

*Vs 16 - And when we came into Rome, Paul was allowed to stay by himself, with the soldier who guarded him.*

When they finally arrived in Rome, Paul was allowed to stay by himself with a soldier who guarded him.

Paul, as an un-condemned man was given great freedom, although because he was not yet declared innocent, a soldier was assigned to him that guarded him.

**We do not know all the details**, but he was likely chained to a Roman soldier day and possibly even night. We do not know for sure. As best we understood it the Roman soldiers would rotate every four hours.

Paul talk about this in Phillipians chapter 1. But Paul was provided with **great freedoms there in Rome**.

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*Vs 17-20 - 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. 18 When they had examined me, they wished to set me at liberty, because there was no reason for the death penalty in my case. 19 But because the Jews objected, I was compelled to appeal to Caesar — though I had no charge to bring against my nation. 20 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."*

After three days in Rome, Paul called the local leaders of the Jews together.

So Paul wastes not time in fulfilling the principle that we have seen him employ in every city he has entered (to the Jews first and then to the Gentiles). We have seen this over and over again (Acts 9:20; 13:5, 14; 14:1; 17:1-2, 10, 17; 18:4, 19; 19:8).



After three days, Paul calls for a meeting with the local Jewish leaders. He will have two meetings, this is the first.

Paul then walks through all that has happened that has led to him being here in Rome, under house arrest. His discourse breaks into **eight heads**:

- 1) The address, he addresses them as men and brothers.
  - a. You can sense his camaraderie with his fellow Jews.
- 2) He lays out first that he had done nothing against:
  - a. Our people (Jews). Notice, he calls fellow Hebrews “our people.” Paul saw himself as a Jew.
  - b. The customs of our forefathers (circumcision as one example).
- 3) He explains how he was handed over to the Romans in Jerusalem.
- 4) **Vs 18** – The Romans examined me and were prepared to release me since they had found me guilty of nothing deserving imprisonment or death.
- 5) **Vs 19** – But the attacks and threats of attacks by the Jews forced him to appeal to Caesar.
- 6) Although Paul did not have any charges to make against his own nation, He was forced (by Festus) to appeal to Caesar to protect himself from them and from their attacks.
- 7) It is because of the accusation of the Jews, that I have asked to see you and discuss these matters with you. I wanted to make sure you are aware of what has happened and even to some degree, why.
- 8) The PUNCH LINE. Paul then states, in actual fact, it is on account of the “**hope of Israel**” that I am here in Rome in chains.
  - a. The hope that Paul is referring to is the **Messianic hope**, namely that **Jesus is the promised Messiah**.
  - b. This is the **real rub**. The nation has been waiting since its inception for the promised Messiah, the promised deliverer and Paul is crystal clear, he believes Jesus is that person. That is, Paul states, the actual reason he was in chains!

We have discussed this but the nation of Israel had been waiting for the Promised Messiah and their own Bible was loaded with verses about this coming King, this coming deliverer.

***Vs 21 - 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."***

Then these Jewish leaders respond to Paul, we have not received any letters from Judea about you, none of the Jewish brothers coming from Jerusalem have reported or spoken any evil against you.

We have heard nothing about this at all!

***Vs 22 - 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."***

But, we desire to hear from you and what your views are, for we have heard about this sect.

The Greek word translated sect is **αἵρεσις (haireisis)**, it means a choosing of one's tenants. The Sadducees were called a sect (Acts 5:17). The Pharisees were called a sect (Acts 15:5). Christianity was viewed as a sect that arose out of Judaism.

**Two points here:**

**FIRST**, even in Rome, the Jews **knew about Christianity**.

**SECOND**, we see that among the Jews, even those in Rome, and in the surrounding areas, these Jewish leaders say this **sect was spoken against**.

The Greek word translated “spoken against” is **ἀντιλέγω (antilego)** and it means to **speak against**, to **deny**, or to **decline**. What they seem to be saying is many **Jews reject this sect!** This of course is true, and we have seen it play out throughout the book of Acts.

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*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.*

The Jews in Rome appointed a day when they would hear what Paul had to say.

They came to the place where Paul was lodging and they came in **great number**. The Greek word Luke uses is **πλείων (pleion)**, it means a **great many**, or a **large number**. Clearly this was a much larger group than the original group.

Then Luke records a few important details from the meeting:

**First** – Paul testified to them and **expounded** to them from morning until evening.

**Expounded** – The Greek word means to **set forth**, or to **declare**. The tense is imperfect meaning he kept explaining and setting forth, in fact Luke tells us plainly that he **expounded** to them from **morning until evening**.

**Testified** – to **attest**, to **solemnly affirm**, to **give solemn testimony**. Paul testified to them... (second major point).

**Second – The Kingdom of God**. Paul was expounding and testifying to these Jews the Kingdom of God.

Now we are not left to our own devices to determine exactly what about the Kingdom of God, Paul was testifying, for Luke tells us plainly.

Seven times in the book of Acts Luke mentions the Kingdom of God (Acts 1:3-8; 8:12; 14:22; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23; 28:31).

**Third** – He was **trying to convince them** about Jesus from the Law and the prophets.

Trying to convince, the Greek word is **πειθω (peitho)**, it means to **persuade**, to **attempt to convince with words**. This is precisely what Paul was doing.

We can imagine that the two main points, like we saw before Festus, were:

- 1) Jesus is the **promised Messiah**.
- 2) **Jesus rose from the grave** as predicted by the law of Moses and the prophets.

Can you imagine to be able to hear Paul speak from morning until evening from the law of Moses and the prophets explaining how Jesus was the coming Messiah. **That would have been an amazing lesson!**

Now we do not know what verses from the law and prophets that Paul referenced, but we can imagine some possibilities.

*Vs 24 - And some were convinced by what he said, but others disbelieved.*

Some believed, while others did not believe.

We have watched this reality play out over and over again as Paul has travelled around the known world preaching the gospel.



Hopefully this reality takes the pressure off you and I when we share our faith. Everyone is not going to believe us. Everyone did not believe the apostle Paul.

**But some did believe**, some became convinced, some placed faith in Jesus Christ and were saved!

*Vs 25-27 - 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: 26 "'Go to this people, and say, "You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive." 27 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.'*

Picture these verses in your mind, see them play out in your mind's eye.

Some in this large group **were discussing this among themselves**, they were disagreeing, with some saying yes, Jesus must be the promised Messiah, while others were saying no, he cannot be.

First, an observation, we have seen this multiple times, but I want us to see it again. The Scriptures are authored by a human mind and a divine mind.

A prophet wrote them, but he was writing what the Holy Spirit said. Do you see that in vs 25? *"The Holy Spirit was right in saying to your fathers through Isaiah the prophet..."*

Second, notice how Luke describes this, this debate, this disagreement broke out about who Jesus was. Some saying he was the Messiah, some rejecting such an idea.

**It was then that Paul quoted Is 6:9-12.** This is what we would call a literal prophecy with application.

The literal prophecy was fulfilled in the Babylonian captivity. The application that Paul is making is to the Jews of his day. He is saying you, in rejecting the Messiah are hard hearted, deaf, and blind, just like the nation was in the events that led up to the captivity in 586BC.

Let these verses sink in for they say much about the nation of Israel at this particular time in history. They indeed had **heard**, but many refused to understand. They indeed had not only heard with their ears, but had seen with their eyes and yet failed to see.

The reason, that they were rejecting what should have been obvious was because; **the people's hearts (many of the people's hearts) had grown dull**, they had also **grown deaf**, and **blind**.

Their **hardened hearts** were the **judgment of God**, because they had **hardened their hearts**!

*Vs 28 - Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen." 29*

This as we have seen over and over again, the proclamation that the gospel is going to the Gentiles, gets the Jews fired up.

Let it be known to you, that this **salvation of God**, as outlined in the Old Testament (law and prophets), has been and is being sent to the Gentiles and **"they will listen!"**

This salvation, by grace through faith in the promised Messiah is going to the Gentiles and they **will receive it**!

Indeed, at Pentecost the church was only Jews and Jewish proselytes, now almost 30 years later it has morphed into a church that is principally Gentiles.

The Gentiles have listened and with great joy have received God's salvation in his promised Son, who is the promised Messiah.

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*Vs 30 - He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him,*

Paul would be in Rome for two years, living in what appears to be a rented home, living at his own expense.

During this time, he would welcome all who would come to Rome.

During this time, he would write what we now call the prison epistles: **Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon**

It was during this very time that he wrote this to the church in Philippi (Phil 1:12-14).

Do we see things this way? Paul said my imprisonment has advanced the gospel, the whole imperial guard had heard about Jesus and knows why I am in chains, for Christ! Brothers, fellow believers seeing this were emboldened!

**OK, the question you likely have. Why in the world would it take Nero two years to hear Paul's case?**

**According to Fruchtenbaum and others: "Under Roman law, two years was the length of time accusers had to present their case. If they failed to show up within that time frame, as was true in this case, the accused would be released by default."**

I imagine, assuming this is correct, they knew they did not have a case, they likely feared with this flimsy so-called case coming before Nero, and after all this keep Paul off the streets for two years.

*Vs 31 - proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.*

During this time, Paul continued to proclaim **the kingdom of God**, teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ.

No doubt teaching that Jesus was the **promised Messiah** and that he **rose from the grave**.

He did this **with all boldness**; the Greek word literally means with **confidence**. Yes, he was bold, but more significantly, he was **confident in what he declared**.

And he did so without hindrance, the Greek word is **ἀκωλύτως (akolutos)**, it is a hapax legomenon that means to do something **without interference**.

Paul is dropped into the capital of the Roman empire and allowed to confidently declare the gospel and to do so without hinderance?

He has been hindered throughout his entire ministry, and the greatest freedom is granted in the lion's den called Rome.

And abruptly, before we learn the rest of the story, the book of Acts comes to a sudden end.

**This is how the book of Acts ends: Paul is in the capital of the Roman Empire, he is freely declaring the gospel openly, without hindrance, and with the full knowledge of the Roman government.**

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