

### THE BOOK OF ACTS

#### Lesson 57, Chapter 28 End of Study

Today we bring the Book of Acts to a close. It has been a long odyssey and when we complete chapter 28 I'll briefly review and summarize the book.

When we concluded last time, Paul was in the presence of the Jewish leadership of Rome. There were perhaps as many as 50,000 Jews living in Rome at this time, and so there would have been many leaders. We find that the Roman Jews don't have a great connection to the Jews of the Holy Land. It might be too strong to characterize it as an us/them sort of relationship, but clearly the long distance between Jerusalem and Rome, and the totally different lifestyles represented by the residents of each place, created a challenging barrier between the tolerant Jews of Rome versus the zealous Jews of Jerusalem. It is probably fair to say that the Jews of Rome held a similar desire for a peaceful co-existence with the Romans as did the Sadducees of Jerusalem. Of course there was a price to pay to attain that goal of peaceful co-existence, and the price was to compromise the Jewish religion with Roman pagan ways, and to accept and support Roman political rule and Hellenistic lifestyle.

Therefore the Jews of Rome were a bit concerned about ***Sha'ul*** who arrived in chains. Was he a trouble maker; a fomenter of rebellion? They had heard about The Way and they knew of Paul as an evangelist of this movement, and now he shows up as a prisoner. They had no desire to be associated with Paul if it might damage the relationship between themselves and the Romans. Paul well knew this and so was quick to say that he had done nothing against Roman law or Jewish Law. In fact, he says that the Romans had decided to release him but some Judean Jews objected and that is why he appealed to Caesar and has come to Rome as a prisoner.

Let's re-read part of Acts chapter 28.

#### RE-READ ACTS CHAPTER 28:17 – end

Naturally we are only reading a few selected quotes and recollections chosen by Luke from the first meeting between Paul and the Roman Jewish leadership, not the entirety of the dialogue, so we need to do a bit of reading between the lines. The Jewish leadership wanted to know why Paul was in this predicament and Paul knew they would be skeptical so he initiated a preemptive strike and called for this meeting. But rather than addressing any specific accusation, or apparently even identifying who exactly made the accusations against him, Paul offers that the reason he is here and wanting to speak with these distinguished Jews is because of the hope of Israel. What is the hope of Israel? Resurrection! That is, he came to Rome willingly, in a sense, because he desired so much to tell the people of Rome about the Gospel and how resurrection is the lynchpin of the Gospel of Yeshua. So it is really Paul's devotion to Israel's ancestral hope that has cost him his personal freedom as opposed to him having committed some crime against Romans or Jews.

As was the typically Roman way, the Jewish leadership of Rome answers Paul in a polite and diplomatic way by saying that they had not received “any letters” from Judea, and further that no Jew that has come to Rome from Judea has told them anything bad about Paul personally. So they are willing to at least hear what Paul has to say. What is their interest? It is that what little they have heard about The Way, as a sect, is not good. And we need to continue to note that Jews, including the Jewish leadership of Rome, regarded The Way as a sect of Judaism (as the Scriptures clearly say). So as of the time of this meeting (around 60 or 61 A.D.) no one knew Believers in Yeshua as being part of anything else other than a peculiar Jewish sect. It was not in any way seen as a separate religion and certainly not viewed as a new gentile religion. Thus we must keep in mind that any mention of “Christians” that we find in our New Testaments during this era is an anachronism (that is, it is reading something that occurred later on backward in time to before it actually existed). So we must not picture Believers at this time as strictly divided into Jews and gentiles, with the gentiles belonging to the “Church” while the Jews belonged to the synagogue. Believers in Yeshua remained nearly entirely Jewish controlled, with its headquarters in Jerusalem. While this indeed would change later, that doesn’t occur within the timeframe of the Book of Acts.

It is hard to know what is meant by the Roman Jews “not receiving any letters” from Judea about Paul or The Way. I presume it to mean proclamations from the Sanhedrin telling them to not associate with Believers who might come to Rome, and to declare The Way as a heretical movement of Judaism. So essentially the leadership is saying that there is no official complaint or instruction against Paul or The Way and thus they feel free to have a conversation with Paul and hear what he has to say about it. As David Stern, a Messianic Jew, points out in his commentary on Acts, unfortunately modern day Jews are not so open minded about hearing what Messianics have to say about Yeshua and the Gospel of Christ. Judaism has long ago decided that Jews who accept Christ should have no audience or association with mainstream Jews; the ultra-religious being especially adamant on this matter.

This first meeting was essentially a preliminary meeting; it resulted in setting an appointment for another meeting in which Paul would elaborate on his position. Verse 23 explains that “large numbers” of Jews came to hear Paul at the next meeting. All day (from morning to evening) they stayed and listened as Paul walked them through his theology of the Gospel. Or, as Luke has called it, Paul instructed them on the Kingdom of God. Let me interject that the terms the Kingdom of God and The Kingdom of Heaven means exactly the same thing; the two terms are interchangeable. And notice what Paul used to try and persuade these Roman Jews to his way of thinking: the Torah of Moses and the Prophets. Let’s be clear: this means he referenced Holy Scripture as the phrase “the Torah and the Prophets” used in this way does not indicate **Halachah**, Jewish Law.

Like with any group of people (Jew or gentile), some believed Paul but others didn’t. And what always happens in such cases is that as those who came to the meeting were leaving, they were debating and disagreeing with one another. Clearly the main point that Paul made to these leaders (beyond his belief that Yeshua is the Messiah), is that one can become a member of God’s Kingdom only by honest, sincere repentance. And it is a refusal to repent that blocks one’s access to eternal life. We learn this because of the Scripture passage that Paul used to, one last time, try to persuade the naysayers with. It was Isaiah 6: 9, 10.

### Isaiah 6:9-10 CJB

<sup>9</sup> *He said, "Go and tell this people: 'Yes, you hear, but you don't understand. You certainly see, but you don't get the point!'"*

<sup>10</sup> *"Make the heart of this people [sluggish with] fat, stop up their ears, and shut their eyes. Otherwise, seeing with their eyes, and hearing with their ears, then understanding with their hearts, they might repent and be healed!"*

Rabbi Yochanan said this about this passage of Isaiah: ***"Great is the power of repentance that it rescinds a man's final sentence."*** So it is not as though Paul was unique in his theology that it is repentance that paves the way to eternal life with God. But what Paul was trying to help these leaders understand is that repentance alone doesn't do it. The Gospel of Christ requires repentance PLUS a dependence on the work of Yeshua on the cross to gain eternal life. This is something that most Jews could not and, to this day, cannot accept.

But now we hit one of those passages that has been contorted and twisted to fit an agenda; verse 28. It says that the salvation offered by God has been sent to the gentile nations and that they will listen. Much Christian doctrine has been created with this verse as its core reference to claim that this means that Gentiles replaced Israel as God's chosen people. That is, God rejected the Jews and accepted the gentiles thus replacing the old people with the new people. Nothing here says such a thing. As I demonstrated in our last lesson, the idea that the Jews as a community of people rejected Christ but Gentiles as a community of people accept Him is ludicrous. We know of scores of thousands of Jews in the Book of Acts that accepted Christ, and far fewer gentiles. Gentiles outnumbered Jews at least 200 to 1 at this time. And as the chart I showed you previously reveals, in our day no more than 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of Gentiles have accepted Christ, with 2/3<sup>rd</sup> rejecting Him. So the bulk of Gentiles have rejected Christ just as the bulk of Jews have rejected Christ. Salvation is on an individual, one by one, basis; not as a collective of people.

When we go back to the Abrahamic Covenant to find the legal basis for salvation, we learn that it was always God's intention that all the families of the earth would be blessed by what God did through Abraham's descendants...the Hebrews. This would affect not just Jews or not just Gentiles. So the purpose of this statement of verse 28 is not to show a transfer of salvation or preference from one people to another, but rather God said long ago that he would spread the Gospel to the ends of the earth, and that necessarily includes gentiles.

The Book of Acts ends by telling us that Paul stayed in the place he had rented for 2 years. And all during that time he was given the freedom to proclaim the Kingdom of God and to teach about Yeshua. Why Paul was there for 2 years without his case being heard we don't know. God said Paul would stand before Caesar; but we never learn if he did or not. In fact we really don't know if Paul ever got out of prison in Rome. Many scholars think he died in prison. In fact there is a strong hint in 2Timothy (that was written while he was still under arrest) that Paul sensed that his death was imminent.

### 2Timothy 4:1-9 CJB

<sup>1</sup> *I solemnly charge you before God and the Messiah Yeshua, who will judge the living and the dead when he appears and establishes his Kingdom:*

<sup>2</sup> *proclaim the Word! Be on hand with it whether the time seems right or not. Convict, censure and exhort with unfailing patience and with teaching.*

<sup>3</sup> *For the time is coming when people will not have patience for sound teaching, but will cater to their passions and gather around themselves teachers who say whatever their ears itch to hear.*

<sup>4</sup> *Yes, they will stop listening to the truth, but will turn aside to follow myths.*

<sup>5</sup> *But you, remain steady in every situation, endure suffering, do the work that a proclaimer of the Good News should, and do everything your service to God requires.*

<sup>6</sup> *For as for me, I am already being poured out on the altar; yes, the time for my departure has arrived.*

<sup>7</sup> *I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.*

<sup>8</sup> *All that awaits me now is the crown of righteousness which the Lord, "the Righteous Judge," will award to me on that Day- and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for him to appear.*

<sup>9</sup> *Do your best to come to me soon.*

That certainly sounds like a statement of someone who was convinced that they had very little time left on this earth.

So there you have it. We have arrived at the other side of the bridge that I spoke of when we first started 57 lessons ago. An Old Testament Hebrew Gospel as foretold by ancient Hebrew Prophets has been transported across a vast chasm of time and culture and has arrived in the world of the New Testament complete with the synagogue, Judaism, and gentile world dominance. But was the Gospel taken away from the Jews and turned over to the gentiles as Christianity claims? The Book of Acts exposes the fallacy of that fundamental Christian doctrine. We have also seen that the Hebrew-Jewish Gospel was **not modified** to allow for gentiles; rather gentiles had always been welcome to join with the Hebrew covenants under certain terms and conditions. It is that the Jews themselves had to learn that their Traditions, their *Halachah*, which had developed since Babylon, had to be reformed to recover the meaning and truth of Holy Scripture. Yeshua of Nazareth was not only God incarnate and the Messiah; He was also the great reformer who brought a new clarity to the Gospel and to the Holy Scriptures in general and to the Law of Moses in particular. Once the needed reforms He spawned were underway, then the acceptance of gentiles into the Kingdom of God became a natural progression, even though the majority of Jews recoiled at such a thought and fought it tooth and nail. It is ironic that today (and for the past 1900 years) that gentile Christianity has recoiled at the thought that the entire Bible is a Hebrew document, that Our Savior was and is

Jewish, that Jews do not have to abandon their Jewishness to accept Christ, and that our faith is, in reality, a faith with Hebrew roots and is not a new gentile creation.

While Paul gets so much of the credit for bringing the Gospel to the gentiles Acts reveals his fervent and continuing activity with the Diaspora Jewish community. We also saw that it was Peter who got the ball rolling at the same time that Paul was still an enemy of Yeshua. Remember that Peter was one of the original 12 Disciples; Paul only arrived on the scene well after Yeshua's death and resurrection. So Peter sat at feet of the Master for a couple of years (at least) to hear the unfiltered truth. It was Peter, not Paul, who was there for the monumental Shavuot (Pentecost) feast in Jerusalem when the Holy Spirit descended like fire upon the Believers. It was also Peter who was taught by the Lord that gentiles were NOT inherently unclean and that they, too, were part of the promise made to Abraham.

Let's briefly review our step by step journey through the Book of Acts and watch how it leads us by the hand across the bridge from the Old to the New Testament, if only we'll open our eyes and ears and be receptive to its message.

Chapter 1 began by identifying the author of the Book of Acts as Luke. He had written an earlier work that we now call the Gospel of Luke that dealt with Yeshua's life and ministry. But his sequel, the Book of Acts, deals with what those men whom Yeshua raised up as disciples, and to whom He entrusted His work on earth, did after His death. Sadly we learned that during the earliest centuries of Rome-based gentile Christianity the Book of Acts was intentionally suppressed and thus few Christians knew that it existed. We also learned why it was kept in the closet: the early Church Fathers (all gentiles) considered it too Jewish, and thus dangerous to their gentiles-only Christian doctrine.

Chapter 2 documents the awesome arrival of the Holy Spirit at the annual Shavuot celebration in Jerusalem. This was something that Yeshua promised was needed but would happen only after He departed into Heaven. The power of the Spirit enabled ordinary Holy Land Jews to spontaneously speak foreign languages that they didn't know. This unexpected event gave Peter an opportunity to address the astonished crowds of Jews and tell them about Christ. He tells them that Yeshua is the Messianic descendant of David that was prophesied from ages past. Prior to this day Luke says that there were only about 120 Believers in total. By the end of Shavuot the Believing congregation grew by 3,000....all Jews.

Chapter 3 focused on the disciple Peter; the one that Yeshua obviously favored. On his way to the Temple (where the disciples tended to congregate) Peter is confronted by a crippled man who wanted alms. Peter instead healed him by the power of God. The amazed crowd again gave Peter a platform to speak where he explained that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob has gloried His Son Yeshua of Nazareth; and even though men killed Him, he arose from the dead and defeated death. Peter tells the people that this same Yeshua is the prophet like Moses that Moses said would come after him.

Peter had become well known and he was speaking to the people at the Temple about resurrection. We learn that while the Pharisees and the common folk believed in resurrection of the dead, the Sadducees (aristocrats who ran the Temple and the Priesthood) did not. This

issue of resurrection is a source of conflict throughout the Book of Acts. So Peter and John were arrested by the Jewish Temple police and taken before the Sanhedrin where they were questioned. The Jewish elders wanted to know how they had managed to heal the cripple. The disciples made it clear that it was through the power of the one the Jewish High Court had crucified. Peter and John were ordered to stop speaking in the name of Yeshua; they flatly refused. The numbers of Believers, all Jewish, continued to grow.

In chapter 5 we met Hananyah and Sapphira, Believers, who owned some property and sold it. They had apparently promised to give the proceeds to the leadership of The Way to be distributed to the poor, but they lied and only gave some of it. Hananyah was struck dead by God for this, and shortly afterward so was his widow. A reverent fear now spread among the Believers; this was no game they were playing. Miracles of healings continued and this worried the High Priest since the Believers were becoming highly esteemed by the common folk. Some disciples were arrested and taken before the Sanhedrin and ordered to stop healing in the name of Yeshua. While being interrogated Peter told the Sanhedrin that God had exalted Yeshua to His right hand in Heaven. The Sanhedrin called this blasphemy and some wanted Peter executed for his heresy; one elder counseled it was better to let this movement run its course and die out as had countless other similar movements. Peter was flogged and released.

The number of Believers was growing daily and of course there were growth pains. Greek speaking Jews (meaning Diaspora Jews) and Hebrew speaking Jews from the Holy land had a mistrust, if not downright dislike, of one another. The Greek speakers felt that their widows were not being given an equal share of charity as were the Hebrew speakers' widows. The leadership council of The Way (the name they had given to their sect) decided that 7 men of the congregation should administer the charitable funds; and wisely to diffuse the situation they chose 7 Greek speakers to do the job. One of those chosen was a man named Stephen. By now priests were joining the ranks of the Believers, which only increased the alarm and anger of the High Priest. One of the 400 or so synagogues in Jerusalem vehemently opposed Stephen's message (mainly because he was a hated Samaritan) and hired some men to lie and say that they heard Stephen speak against Moses and the Temple. He was arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin on charges of blasphemy.

Chapter 7 tells the story of Stephen's martyrdom. His defense speech to the Sanhedrin reminded them that their forefathers killed the prophets for speaking the truth, and now this present generation did the same thing to the greatest prophet ever, Yeshua. Stephen's execution set off a series of retributions against other Believers and they scattered. But all their scattering accomplished was to further spread the Gospel message among the Jewish community.

The Yeshua movement is spreading rapidly in the Holy Land area and chapter 8 shows how some deceivers will always try to personally profit from, or hijack, a successful ministry. We read the story of a sorcerer named **Shim'on** who witnessed the amazing power of the Holy Spirit that was wielded by Peter and others of the disciples, and he wanted that power for himself; as a professional magician his thought was to purchase it. Peter strongly rebuked him. But then something else with great significance occurred; an angel directed the disciple

Philip to intercept an Ethiopian Eunuch who was a God-fearer. Philip obeyed, showed him a passage in Isaiah 53 about the Messiah, and the Eunuch believed. Philip baptized him and now a gentile Believer in Yeshua joined the fold.

The focus begins to shift from Peter to Paul. In chapter 9 we find ***Sha'ul*** encounter the risen Messiah; the conversation takes place in Hebrew. Paul is currently employed by the Sanhedrin to go to Damascus to find and arrest some of these Believers who had fled the persecutions of the High Priest in Jerusalem. The experience is so powerful that Paul drops all resistance and becomes a Believer. Yeshua says gentiles are to be Paul's target audience.

While at this time the movement consisted nearly 100% of Jews, it was becoming clear that God intended for gentiles to be offered membership. But how could that be? Gentiles were the enemies of the Jews, and therefore thought to be enemies of God. Tradition, ***Halakhah***, was that gentiles were born unclean and remained unclean and therefore Jews ought to have nothing to do with them. And gentiles certainly ought not to be invited to put their trust in the Jewish Messiah. To counteract this errant belief the Lord confronts Peter in a vision to help him understand that God does not, and never has, viewed gentiles as inherently unclean. He uses animals let down in a cloth from Heaven as the visual imagery.

At first Peter thinks this is God testing him about kosher eating. But after thinking about it he suddenly realizes (in vs. 14) ***"I now understand that God does not play favorites, but that whoever fears him and does what is right is acceptable to Him, no matter what people he belongs to"***. For some reason, to this day, despite Peter saying he now understands that this has nothing to do with kosher eating, the institutional Church doctrine is that God told Peter that this vision was all about food and that He has abolished the kosher food laws. Peter is now prepared to go to yet another gentile, this time a hated Roman soldier named Cornelius, who God said his heart was hungry for the truth. Peter went to the soldier's house, told him the Gospel, and Cornelius and his entire household believed and were saved. In fact, Peter personally witnessed the Holy Spirit falling upon them.

The key words of chapter 11 are its first words: ***"The emissaries and the brothers throughout Judah heard that the gentiles had received the word of God"***. But with the addition of more gentiles, resistance increased among many Jews who demanded that gentiles who were offered to join in Israel's covenants first had to be circumcised and become Jews. As far as the Jewish Priesthood was concerned, things were getting out of hand. This growing movement was viewed as a threat to the Temple power structure and so Peter was again arrested and James, John's brother, was executed. But the Lord once again rescued Peter because Peter's ministry was not yet completed.

Chapters 13 and 14 switch the scene from the Holy Land first to Antioch where a couple of disciples were bringing the Gospel to Jews in that city and then on to the island of Cyprus. Paul then traveled to other nations and as became his custom, each time he entered a new town he'd go to the local synagogue to preach. Many gentiles, God-fearers, had become welcome guests at the synagogues, and as Paul and the other disciples preached the Gospel many Jews and gentiles came to believe in Messiah Yeshua; but others, the bulk, refused. More and more regions of Asia and the Mediterranean were being evangelized with good results from

both Jewish and gentile populations.

However the issue of circumcision for gentiles had become a show stopper. Even the disciples were disagreeing about it among themselves, threatening to divide the group. So Paul and some other disciples went to Jerusalem to set the matter before the leadership of The Way hoping to come to some kind of a definitive resolution. In the end it was agreed that while gentile Believers needed to obey the Biblical purity laws if they were going to fellowship with Jewish Believers they did NOT have to become Jews (by means of a circumcision), or obey Jewish **Halachah**, in order to be full-fledged members of The Way.

In Chapters 16, 17, and 18 the focus is on Paul as he travels extensively throughout the places where Jews lived in foreign lands. During this time he made a disciple of Timothy who was Jewish by birth on his mother's side (his father was a gentile). So now we have Believers that are Jews, some are gentiles, and some are of mixed blood. The Holy Spirit kept prodding **Sha'ul** on, further widening the scope of his ministry to include Macedonia. Another incident is documented by Luke whereby the Devil tried to hijack Paul's ministry. It seems that a girl with a snake spirit started following Paul around screaming and screeching that Paul was a follower of the God Most High. Paul not only rebuked the girl but ordered the snake spirit out of her, demonstrating God's power over the world of demons. Paul was thanked by being thrown in jail because this girl's masters were profiting over her satanic gift of fortune telling, now vanished along with the demon.

In Athens, Greece Paul began debating with their famous philosophers about who is the true God. He spoke the truth of the Gospel to them and shockingly some came to trust even in that spiritually dark place. We also hear of a Jewish Believer named Apollos who hailed from Alexandria, Egypt; but he seemed to know nothing of The Way or of the Holy Spirit. He had been a follower of John the Baptist. So we see that various independent groups of Believers had popped up, but not all had the needed information or held the correct doctrine.

Some Jewish exorcists saw what Paul and other disciples were able to do and so began to try to exorcise demons in the name of Yeshua; they were not Believers. These exorcists encountered one particular demon that was unimpressed by their mechanical recounting of a name that they thought had mystical power; the exorcists were beaten to a pulp by the demon. Surprisingly this had a positive effect on Believers and non-Believers alike as they began to realize that trust, not mindless ritual, was the key to knowing God and having a type of faith that He accepted as real and sincere and was able to save.

While in Greece, after another journey, Paul discovered a plot by unbelieving Jews to assassinate him. As always happens, when a movement such as this one begins to grow and gain attention, opposition will grow more vehement. Some men helped Paul to escape. After further journeys to more far flung nations Paul decided it was time for him to go to Jerusalem again; it had been several years since he had been there. On his way to the Holy City, he stopped at Caesarea Maritima where a prophet named Agav told him that if he went to Jerusalem he would be arrested. He went anyway.

Upon his arrival in Jerusalem he was greeted by James, still the supreme leader of The Way,

and James told him that tens of thousands of Jews had joined the movement and all of them remained steadfast observers of the Torah. But news arrived ahead of Paul that he had been teaching against the Torah and Jewish Tradition. A demonstration involving a vow offering was arranged for Paul to prove his loyalty to the Torah and to his Jewishness; he followed through. However some foreign Jews from Asia were in Jerusalem for the Shavuot festival, and they recognized Paul and slandered him by saying that he had defiled the Temple by bringing gentiles into it. The crowd went into an angry frenzy and the local Roman garrison had to literally rescue Paul from the crowd. This led to an opportunity for Paul to tell his story of his turning to Yeshua, and why everyone should, too. The Romans presented Paul to the Sanhedrin for trial, but the Roman commander could make no sense of the charges brought against him. Paul told the commander that he was Roman citizen, so now he was obligated to see to it that Paul got a fair trial under the Roman legal system. When a conspiracy to assassinate Paul was uncovered, he was spirited away to Caesarea to appear before Governor Felix.

A trial was held with members of the Sanhedrin present making the accusations. Felix was unable to make heads or tails of the charges and saw that this seemed to be a matter of trivial nuances of Jewish law, but nothing meriting death or jail. However not wanting to offend the High Priest, Felix refused to give a verdict and so Paul remained in jail for 2 years until a new Governor arrived: Festus. Festus, too, could make no sense of the charges and asked visiting King Agrippa (a Jew) if he could help him understand. Agrippa listened to Paul and decided that there was nothing he could add. Paul now played his trump card: he used his rights as a Roman citizen to appeal to the Emperor. This was his ticket to go to Rome; something God told him he must do.

The final 2 chapters of Acts details Paul's journey, as a prisoner, to Rome. And here we encounter a fascinating story of terror at sea as a giant storm interrupts the trip and nearly kills all on board the ship. Paul is shipwrecked, but all survive because God promised through an angel that this would be the outcome. Another ship is taken to the shores of Italy and finally Paul arrives in Rome. Still in custody, he has become so trusted that he is assigned only one Roman guard, and is even allowed to rent an apartment of his own to live in. During the next two years he meets with the local Jewish leadership, tells them the Gospel, and many come to belief, although many reject Yeshua. It seems that Paul has finished all that the Lord had intended for him on earth, and Paul either dies in prison in Rome or shortly after being released.

If you have listened and studied diligently over these 57 lessons, you are now well equipped to read the New Testament in the light it was always intended; as a Hebrew document, about a Hebrew savior and His Hebrew disciples, as told within a Hebrew cultural backdrop. Next up: **the Book of Romans.**