

# To the Ends of the Earth

*Series on the book of Acts*

By Dr. Liam Goligher

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## **Tenth Presbyterian Church**

1701 Delancey Street

Philadelphia, PA 19103-6714

**Website:** [www.tenth.org](http://www.tenth.org)

**Online Sermons:** [www.sermonaudio.com/tenth](http://www.sermonaudio.com/tenth)

Do take your Bibles and turn with me to Acts 28. A young man with a title, an Oxford education, and an inherited fortune at his disposal gives them all up in order to become a missionary and on the long journey to the mission field that has captured his imagination, he contracts malaria and dies before reaching the country for which he has such a burden. Roll the clock forward about 100 years, a team of young missionaries spend many months patiently trying to make contact with an unreached tribe, flying low over groups of tribes people they have been dropping gifts and so are trying to build a relationship communicating that they come in peace. Eventually the day arrives when they land their little plane on a sand bar and bearing gifts, they approach the group of tribes people come towards him. As the hours wear on and they make no contact, another plane goes out to investigate only to see their speared bodies lying nearby their plane. They had guns; they could have defended themselves. They had chosen not to. Those are mega stories but what about the private pain? Two Christian young people, they meet in church, they fall in love and they get married in church. They have great expectations of what married life will be and yet not far into their marriage, one of them decides they've had enough and walks off or is unfaithful and a promising marriage is crushed and a spirit is crushed.

You see, many of us struggle with the way in which things work out in our lives and in the lives others. We have discovered that being a Christian is not a kind of secret potion that makes everything in life work out. We have discovered, perhaps swept along by the triumphalistic language of some songs that we sing or speakers that we hear, we become convinced somehow or other that to take a stand for Jesus means that many of the other things in life that are problematic will be swept away in the wonder of this victorious Christian experience. Perhaps you're a Christian and you been tempted to think or to wonder why it is that being a Christian doesn't enable us to avoid some of the more unpleasant aspects of human experience. The roadblocks that we encounter even when we are driven by the highest motives in our work for God, they throw us. We ask ourselves, "How can God possibly be glorified in this?" Or, "How could I possibly be effective for God given the circumstances that I face?" While there are others, of course, who apparently, at least on the surface, never ask those questions at all.

Then we come to this last chapter of Acts. There are a number of things, a number of issues that emerge in the story but I think one of the issues is the mystery of the

providence of God. That's my first point and it's the first thing that strikes me that this chapter addresses. The mystery of the providence of God for that really is the issue, isn't it, that is raised by those kinds of disappointment that I've just described. What is the providence of God? Various definitions but let me give you this definition for this evening for a change instead of quoting some of the others that I have given since I have been here: just think of the providence of God as his good government of our lives. There are two aspects to that. There is the fact, 1: that he governs our lives, that what happens to us is not a kind of random mishmash of events, un-superintended, unplanned, without purpose, but rather God is governing our lives. The details that we think are random aren't random at all. And his government is good, there's the second thing. His government is good, that he does nothing out of any other motive than to bring his children safely home to heaven after the pilgrimage of this life. Someone has summarized the providence of God like this: it concerns God who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will; it declares that no wisdom, no insight, no plan can succeed against the Lord; and it engineers such things so that even evil is worked for the good of those who love him.

Let me point out some aspects of the providence of God in this chapter. There is the providence of God in bringing Paul safely to Rome. That was an unusual thing, at least it was perhaps unexpected given everything that has gone in the run-up up to this point. Chapter 27, we saw Paul getting involved in a shipwreck, of all things, and his life endangered by that shipwreck and, in fact, this chapter begins with it saying that they were brought safely through that experience and they landed on an island which they learned was the island of Malta. So they had been through this terrible thing and yet what Paul has had before his mind's eye for a long time now is this vision that God has given to him to take the Gospel to Rome. He had written to the church at Rome sometime before and he said, "I'm eager to preach the Tospel to you also who are in Rome." He writes that in Romans 1. A little later on we are told that Paul was telling people in chapter 19 of Acts, "I must visit Rome." In chapter 23, Jesus said to him, "Paul, you must testify in Rome." Yet in spite of his burden, in spite of God's word through Jesus to him, in spite of his own desire to take the Tospel to Rome, what we have been finding is circumstance upon circumstance that seems calculated to make it impossible for Paul to get to Rome. I mean, he's been arrested in Jerusalem; subjected to endless trials; attacked by a mob; imprisoned in Caesarea Philippi; threatened with assassination by the Jews; nearly drowned in the Mediterranean; nearly killed by soldiers who think that the easiest thing to do is to get rid of all this excess baggage, the prisoners they have. And now in chapter 28, we didn't read this but he gets to Malta, people show him kindness, they light a fire to make a barbecue for these people who have been shipwrecked; they are gathered around to eat the food at the barbecue when Paul lifts up a piece of wood and throws it into the fire and hidden among the bits of wood is a viper that fastens itself to his wrist. He is nearly poisoned by a viper. Now, you just think it's one thing after another. I mean, if you had a series of events like that in your life, you would be going to see a counselor and get some therapy and be asking the question, "What is going on? Why is it that it is one thing after another? Is God trying to say something to me here? Have I gotten God's plan wrong? Have I taken a wrong turn somewhere along the road? Everything that could go wrong is going wrong."

Chapter 27. We spent a lot of time talking about the storm. Here in chapter 28, the key actually, the beginning of the chapter is what he has to say about the bite of the viper, the snake. These two images, actually, although they really happened, there was a storm and there was a snake, nonetheless of the many things that Luke could record, he records these two things because he sees that there is also a spiritual and metaphorical significance to the storm and to the snake because the storm in Scripture often points to that primeval chaos that was a picture of the evil powers amassed in their opposition to God so that Jesus himself is threatened by a storm at sea and he rebukes the storm as if he is rebuking the devil and he says to the storm, "Be muzzled," because behind the real storm, there is a real devil who is out to destroy Jesus. And the snake, the snake, of course, is the earliest picture in the Bible of Satan and it is the latest picture in the Bible of Satan. He is that ancient serpent, the devil, or Satan. And what we are meant to do is to see that behind the forces of nature and the plots of other people and the imprisonments and the attack and the poisoning by the snake is the sinister figure of the devil, of Satan and his demonic forces that work in the world. Scripture is full of examples of these things. How the devil has constantly tried to thwart God's purposes by destroying God's people. He tried through Pharaoh to kill the Israelites. He tried through Haman, you remember in the time of Esther, to annihilate the Jews. He tried through Herod the Great to destroy the infant Jesus in Bethlehem. He tried through the Sanhedrin to silence the church and the apostolic witness. He has tried the storm and the snake and he will try Nero, the Caesar of Rome, to silence the Gospel and to silence Paul. But God, do you notice, God's thwarts the machinations of the devil by rescuing Paul from all of these circumstances; by healing Paul of the poison and Paul gets to Rome, as we saw, in the end.

So we see the providence of God in bringing Paul safely to Rome but we also see the providence of God in bringing Paul as a prisoner to Rome. How could his being a prisoner and not free to conduct himself and conduct meetings the way he wanted, how could that fit into the plan of God? John Stott in his commentary gives three reasons. He believes that it was because Paul's witness was expanded, and that's true because the flow of people coming to see him. But not only that, especially his opportunity to witness for Christ to the household of Caesar, to those in the high echelons of power within the Empire, and ultimately, we reckon, he had his case heard by the Emperor Nero himself. That was the most prestigious court in the world at that time. God expands his witness.

Secondly, God enriches his witness during this period in prison. It's almost impossible for me to imagine what it must be like to be the Apostle Paul who, I think, was a congenital activist and I think I'm a bit like that and so therefore I can try to identify here, but I really cannot get my head around how he managed five years of inactivity. Two years in Caesarea in prison; six months under armed guard on their trip to Rome; then two years house arrest once he gets to Rome. Were they wasted years? Would he have been champing at the bit, longing to get on with what he had come to do? Would he have been saying, "Right Lord, you made me a preacher, let me preach. This prisoner business is the pits. It really is not a good thing at all."

Yet it's in prison that Paul writes the famous letters, the prison letters. The interesting thing to read about these letters that he writes from Rome is that they have a completely different tone than some of the earlier writings. The earlier writings are written in the heat of battle with a pace and action of a busy life in the background, but these letters are written with reflection and their tone is much more easy-going. There is an atmosphere of joy and peace and patience and contentment because, in a sense, the battle is over and there he is, he's trying to think, and those letters that he writes have led and fed the church for centuries. Those letters are rich but there is an element of reflection, an element of peace about them. When he is imprisoned facing trial and possible death, he knows that he is already secure because Christ is risen. When he is awaiting the Emperor's pleasure, he knows that the ultimate authority in his life is not the Emperor. What can man do to him? The ultimate authority in his life is God. God is the ultimate authority. In each of these experiences, the sovereign, undisputed, unrivaled Lordship of Jesus is front and foremost in Paul's mind and in his confinement he sees as he's never seen before with the clarity that he sees there that the life, the power, the freedom, the victory that come to those who belong to Jesus.

And in prison, his witness is not only enlarged and enriched but it's authenticated because nothing proves the sincerity of our beliefs and our willingness to suffer for them and Paul had to suffer, to be seen to be suffering, for the Gospel that he was preaching. Christianity, the call to serve, the call to suffer both the same word, martyr, martyr, witness. So Paul can say, "I am a prisoner for the sake of the Gentiles." He pays dearly for his loyalty to the freeness and universality of the Gospel.

The first thing that strikes you as you read this is the mystery of God's providence. I think the second thing that strikes you as you come to this last chapter in the book is the humanity of God's servants. I see this in a number of places, for example, we didn't read this but in the beginning of chapter 28, they arrived at an island that was called Malta and, "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." Here's Luke writing about this. He was there. It had begun to rain and it was cold. He remembered the rain. Have you ever been to Scotland? You will remember the rain. In fact, you will remember that that's probably all that ever happened there. But it began to rain and it was cold and "we gathered a bundle of sticks and put them in the fire," and so on, and these natives, in verse seven, "entertained us hospitably for three days." Here is a reminiscence of a real person about a real experience. You see the humanity of these people. Even as Paul says in Romans that we glory in integration, it's nevertheless not an easy thing to do and in the midst of the pressures and strains of life, it costs, doesn't it, to have trouble. And in the small things God comes and shows himself to us. And in this welcome of these Islanders and their provision for them, Luke and Paul recognize the good hand of God.

They do that again when they get to Rome. Do you notice that little detail? We didn't need to know this, this was irrelevant to this story, really, we're not necessarily interested in what happened here, but they are. They came. They land, the ship lands. They make out from there toward Rome and there were brothers who invited them to stay with them for seven days. When they came to Rome and the brothers there heard that they were

coming, we're told that they "came as far as the Forum of Appius and Three Taverns to meet us," and they walked with them along that road into Rome itself. But do you notice at the end of verse 15, Paul thanked God and took courage. Did you know he needed that? Did you know that he needed people to turn up, people who were interested in him, people who cared for him, people who were prepared to walk with him? And the Apostle Paul, the indomitable Apostle Paul, took courage. Isn't that an amazingly human thing? You know, when we affirm our faith Sunday by Sunday in our morning services, we affirm that we believe in the communion of saints. What do we mean by that? Well, we mean by that we're in fellowship with all the saints that have gone before us and many of whom are in glory. We are part of a dead people society. Most of our brothers and sisters are already dead, actually they're already alive. They're in glory. But we need people here. We need flesh and blood people here. Right now we need them and after all the hardships of the voyage, after years of delay to his plans to get there, after the terrible opposition from friends and foes alike, this man needs uplifting and these Roman friends come along and they encourage his heart. We need to believe that fellowship is one of the appointed means of grace to the upbuilding of people in their Christian lives. It is absolutely vital that we have fellowship.

What about the man behind the actions of God? What made this man a spiritual dynamo? I think the characteristics of this man's indomitable spirit are probably transferable into other areas of life and you might recognize this but I think there are three. 1. He had vision. He had a massive spiritual vision and his vision was to preach the gospel where it had never been preached before. He had a massive vision to reach out to the Gentile, non-Jewish world with the Gospel and to see them won for Christ. He could say this to the Romans, "I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from God for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel." He loved the Jews. He was a Jew. He loved the Jews. He wanted them to become believing Jews, believing in Jesus. Not only that, but he longed to preach the Gospel, "It has been my ambition," he says, "to preach the Gospel where Christ is not known." He wanted to do that, to reach his people and to reach the Gentiles. He had a big vision.

Secondly, he had faith and his faith is not derailed when his ministry to Rome doesn't turn out. You know, some of us struggle, don't we, with the constraints of our experience. Life has not turned out the way we imagined it might and our faith is the first casualty. As J. B. Phillips writes about his own experience, "There is an apparent capriciousness and arbitrariness about the working of the Spirit of God which is singularly exasperating to the tidy mind." In other words, sometimes it just doesn't seem to add up. It doesn't fit. You can't see the picture. You can't see where it's going and faith is often the casualty when things start to fall apart.

Vision, faith, and boldness. Boldness. We see that here in this chapter. After giving himself three days to recover from his trip, he was generous to himself, Paul comes out swinging. Here he is in the city, he's still under house arrest. He has a soldier that he is chained to, but his room there becomes a fulcrum from which he moves the world. Listen to his explanation in one of his letters referring to this. "I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the Gospel. As a result, it has

become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ." You can imagine what the authorities are doing. Every day they changed the guard on Paul. They change it every day because apparently these guards get into conversation with Paul or they listen into Paul's conversations with others. Some of the palace guard are getting converted so you don't want that one to go back to Paul. You want to put him somewhere else and send someone else in his place. That someone else who comes in his place is listening to Paul talking to the visitors who are coming while he tells them about Jesus and the palace guard gets interested. He lasts a day. He comes the next day and he gets converted. He gets moved. Somebody else comes and for those two years there is a steady stream of palace guards until what can be known about Jesus is being told everywhere among the palace guard. Says Paul, "It's really served to advance the Gospel. It's great. I'm talking to more pagans day-by-day than I would ever get a chance to do just standing out on the street corner. People are listening." He has a captive audience. "Who is the captive here? It is this Roman soldier who is chained to me. He's the captive. He can't get away from me and I just go yak, yak, yak about the Gospel all the time and he has to listen to what I have to say."

So he has a burden, you see, and he has this boldness because he saw his limitations as just another opportunity for the service of the Gospel. He just gets on with it. He gets on with it. You know, sometimes when people are complaining about things you just want to slap them in the face and say, "Get over it!" That's just my pastoral sensitivity coming out there. "Get over it! Get on with it!" That's what Paul does here. Look at verse 23, what does it say there? We're told that he expounded and testified to the kingdom of God. What did he do? Well, he invited the Jews to come first of all and later Gentiles to come, and while he was talking to these people, he is unpacking the Bible to them. He is telling them, "Look, this is what the Scripture says. This is what Moses said. This is what the prophets say. This is what Jesus did. Don't you see the parallels here? Don't you see that what Moses said about the prophet, what the prophet said about the coming servant and so on, do you see how they are fulfilled in Jesus? Do you see how this is the natural flow of things? This is fulfilled Judaism. This is not something brand new. This is the fruit of all of our past," he's saying to these Jews. That's why he says to them, "I have no charge to bring against my nation, rather I have asked to see you to speak with you," verse 24, "the hope of Israel. It is for the hope of Israel that I am wearing this chain." This is what Israel was hoping for and it has arrived in Christ.

What we read as we read earlier is that the logic of his arguments, the exposition of Scripture, was enough for some of them to believe. By the way, when it says there that "he committed no offense against our people," actually it says in the original "the people," the people of God, that is. The logic and the arguments were compelling enough to keep his audience transfixed for hours as they came and listened to him. And the word of God did what the word of God always does, it discerns; it makes a separation, a distinction between believing and unbelieving people. It acts as an ax that falls and splits apart the minds and hearts of men and women so that you know where you are. As you sit under the word of God, the word of God will do its own work and its own work is this: it is to separate the wheat from the tares; the righteous from the unrighteous; the

believing from the unbelieving. That's what the word of God does. The word does that work.

And as he preaches, do you notice, the word does that work here and some of these Jews believed. They recognized what he was saying to be true. They were convinced by what he said, but others we are told, verse 24, disobeyed, "And disagreeing among themselves, they departed after Paul had made one statement." This is his statement, we're given that statement at some length in the passage because it's so important. His statement is based on Isaiah's prophecy and his statement is simply this, "The Holy Spirit was right in saying to your fathers through Isaiah the prophet," what did he say? He said that in the last days when the word of God would be proclaimed to them, that the word of God would be speaking to people with calloused hearts, deaf ears, eyes tightly shut, unwilling to hear, understand and turn to the Lord for healing. This is why Jesus, you remember, resorted to parables. Not to give little illustrations to make his sermons clearer. He resorted to parables to conceal the truth from people and so judgment on people for not listening to the truth or seeing the truth standing there in front of them, their Messiah, the Son of God.

But the other thing we see is this, look at verse 28: that the rejection of the Messiah by many Jews, by unbelieving Jews, the rejection of the Messiah by unbelieving Jews opens up a door of faith to us, us who are Gentile. This is what the Psalmist was hoping for when he says, "That your ways may be known on the earth, your salvation among all nations," or again in Psalm 98, "All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God." This last judicial word in the book of Acts is a last judicial word to unbelieving Israel that believing Israel has had its doors opened to invite Gentiles by God's grace, who were without hope and without God in the world, who did not have the promises and covenants, to bring them into the Israel of God, to graft them into the main olive tree, to make them part of the people of God. People who once were not a people have become part of the people of God. This last word in this book is of monumental significance to the future of Christianity.

God has opened a door of faith to the Gentiles and, you see, in the flow of Luke's work and I remind you that Luke's work is one big work that comprises his Gospel and his history of the apostles, comes to its great conclusion when you get to that last phrase which really irritates me. Some of these commentators say it all ends in a kind of down beat. It doesn't end down beat at all. There he is proclaiming the kingdom of God, teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance, without hindrance. Here is the Gospel and it is going on. You say it is hindered by Paul being in prison? No, it's not. The Gospel is going on. There will be other hindrances, apparent hindrances in the history of the world, but the Gospel will go on. It will go on unhindered. There is irresistible victory ahead for the Gospel. In the bigger picture of Luke's work, the second and last Adam, Jesus, has resisted Satan and beaten him in his life, death and resurrection, and the task of the first Adam is now being fulfilled by Jesus through his church as the church increases and multiplies and fills the earth and subdues it and brings more and more and more people into the kingdom of God and makes them part of the people of God.

That's a big picture. It's an amazing picture. Here is the onward march of the church. Luke leaves it there. He leaves the church moving, moving out into the world, terrible is an army with banners. Paul is a prisoner but he isn't Rome's prisoner, he is Jesus' prisoner and the word of God is multiplying, overcoming all hazards, pressing men and women into service for the Gospel and the word is going to multiply from Rome throughout the Roman Empire. And the word is going to skip across seas to little islands on the fringes of Europe; and the word of God is going to skip down into Africa; it's going to skip eastward; it's going to skip across an ocean westward. The word of God is going to move unhindered as it is proclaimed with boldness. God's people might be imprisoned in real jails or in difficult circumstances or in tortured bodies, but the Gospel is not impeded. God is able to provide hearers for his good news message when he has a dedicated instrument like Paul and like you in his hands to use.

My dear friends, as you look at this story you think to yourself, "How can God use all the things that have gone wrong in my life for his glory?" He can. A woman who is about my age whose name is Joni was only 17 years old when she dived into Chesapeake Bay and lost touch with her body for the rest of her life. The story of her battle to survive and then the battle for her soul is one of the great Christian stories of our lifetime. She writes this, "Few of us have had the luxury and it took me forever to think of it like that, to come to ground zero with God. Before the accident, my question had always been, 'How will God fit into this situation? How will God affect my dating life? My career plans? The things that I enjoy?' All these options were gone. It was me, a helpless body, and God. I had no other identity but God and gradually he became enough. I became overwhelmed with the phenomenon of the personal God who created the universe living in my life. He could make me attractive and worthwhile. Maybe God's gift to me is my dependence on him. I'll never reach the place where I am self-sufficient, where God is crowded out of my life. I'm aware of his grace to me every moment. My need for help is obvious to everyone. I wake up, flat on my back, waiting for someone to come and dress me. I cannot even comb my hair or blow my nose alone. And there is one more thing, I have hope for the future. The Bible speaks of our bodies being glorified in heaven. In high school, that was always a hazy foreign concept but now I realize that I will be healed. I have not been cheated out of being a complete person. I'm just going through a 40 year delay and God is with me even through that. Being glorified, I know the meaning of that now, it's the time after my death here when I will be on my feet dancing."

There we leave Paul. I don't want to leave him yet. What happens next? Likely he is released after two years. Most likely he makes his trip to Spain and preaches the Gospel there. He certainly is imprisoned again under Nero and legend has it that he was beheaded for his faith in Christ. Can you imagine that scene? Can you imagine it from Paul's perspective? Marched out of prison toward the block. His heart must have raced with a mixture of fear and anticipation. As he kneeled with his head on the block, he would have prayed and as he waited for the sword to fall, his memory would have replayed the visits he had made to all those people in so many locations telling them the good news message. I imagine the face of Stephen was never far from Paul's mind and at that moment the face of Stephen would appear to him once again, that first Christian



martyr. He was there when Steven died. He would remember that Damascus Road experience that changed his life, when it seemed all heaven broke loose and there was the Son of God himself. He would remember the terror of that moment when he recognized that face, when he saw those hands, those feet, when he realized how desperately wrong he had been about Jesus. He would recall that moment. It would imprint itself on his mind. Jesus, on the throne of God Almighty, it had shaken him to the very core of his being.

As he waits, he knows the time is now at hand. He had known it would happen this way. Very soon he would be home and still absorbed in his thoughts, still praying for grace, he didn't notice the sword being lifted. Did he hear the swoosh as it fell? Did he feel the violent thud against the back of his head? Was there a stab of pain? And then darkness. Then that gradual consciousness, if you have ever fainted or woken from a deep sleep. You hear the sounds, perhaps of voices. Faces begin to come into focus. Faces. His face. He had seen that face before. Hands reaching out toward him. He knew those hands. He had seen those wounds before. Embraced by him. Embraced by him and seeing over his shoulder the smiling face of Stephen waiting to greet him. Home. Home at last. The fight over. The weariness over. And overwhelming everything else, he had said, "Did I say to live is Christ, to die is gain? I understated it. Did I say to them the sufferings of this present age are not worth comparing with the glory that shall be revealed in us? I understated the glory! I understated the glory! What sufferings? What pain? What imprisonment? What trials? What tribulations? What sorrows? Joy unspeakable and full of glory!" And the trumpets would sound to welcome a brother home. Home at last. Home at last. "Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Lord." One day, brothers and sisters, we will see that face. We will see those hands. We will feel that embrace and we will be home at last.

Let's pray.

*What a day that will be when our Jesus we shall see. When we look upon his face, the one who saved us by his grace. What a day. What a glorious day that will be. Prepare us for that day, we pray, right now. We pray in your name, Lord Jesus. Amen.*