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*The Unstoppable Church*  
**A Fitting Conclusion?**  
**Acts 28:1-31**  
Pastor Jeff Petersen

A friend of mine this week told me they are amazed at all of the things that Bryan Clark reads. They were just sharing, you know, he always has some bit of wisdom or insight. He's reading this book, or he's reading that book. I think the latest one is this, I don't know, 6000-page book on the life of Abraham Lincoln.

So when they shared that with me, I began to think this week, *Well, I ought to share something I've been reading and maybe a little bit of wisdom and insight I've been gleaning.* So I found a book this week (actually my 6-year-old found this book in his first-grade library). It has a lot of pages, fortunately it also has a lot of pictures and a really cool cover. I don't know if you see that, but it's kind of like Christmas bulbs or something. This is a *Guinness Book of World Records*.

I don't know if you've ever looked at a *Guinness Book*, but, boy, you talk about greatness and amazing things. There is some stuff in there that will really just amaze you, I'm quite sure—like for instance, Gary Turner who holds the world record for being able to stretch your skin out the farthest. He can actually grab his skin and he can pull it out six and a half inches. That's pretty amazing. That has led to him also having the record for most clothespins attached to a human face at, what is it, 159. And I'm thinking to myself, *Is this a childhood dream? Or when exactly do you start to aspire to that?*

There's another guy in here; he has a record because he's got this huge clump of hair growing off his ear. And he's got a record for this. It actually has grown out, this big old thing, five and a half inches. And I'm wondering, *Do you part that? Or gel it? Or what exactly is the treatment for something like that?*

Of course, then there's this Michael Lotito, or however you say it, and, well, he's been eating metal and glass since 1959. I think his brain went out in 1958! But since 1966 (this is true; this is documented record stuff) this guy has consumed 18 bicycles, 15 shopping carts, 7 TV sets, 6 chandeliers, 2 beds (I don't know if that's with or without mattress and box springs), a pair of skis, a computer, and get this, a Cessna light aircraft. Talk about your cast iron stomach! (I know, that's bad). But think about this guy going to the airport and trying to go through the metal detector and explaining to the security, "No, really, my pockets are empty. I just have an aircraft in my stomach."

But the book is filled with people who want to be great, and then actually it's filled with some people who really are great—amazing people like the young child prodigy who at 14 years is the composer of a musical (a total musical that's been played all over his country of Hungary).

Then, of course, there are people who are just great when it comes to the whole realm of the arts and artists. You're very familiar, I'm sure, with Pablo Picasso, such a great artist that one of his paintings literally sold for more than a hundred million dollars.

Then there are people who are just great at remembering things and having knowledge, even trivial knowledge. Ken Jennings literally won two and a half million dollars answering questions on the show *Jeopardy* with his great knowledge.

We all know about great athletes, people like Peyton Manning who is just great at throwing touchdown passes and holds a record for that. And then there's Roger Federer who is great at tennis, probably in fact the greatest tennis player to ever play the game. It's a book filled with people who *are* great—or who want to somehow be considered great.

This week as I've been thinking and studying, I've thought, you know, probably one of the truly great people that you could ever hear about is the apostle Paul, this person who laid down his life in service for Jesus Christ in ways that for most of us are really simply unimaginable. And talk about your great books—a great book certainly is the Book of Acts, which we are going to finish this morning.

So if you have a Bible with you, we want to look at the great apostle and lead toward the great conclusion of this great story in Acts chapter 28. Just a little flyover of where we've been—you'll remember that in Acts 22 through 26, in spite of the repeated attempts to take his life, God protects the apostle Paul and he testifies before the Jewish Council. He testifies before Roman governors and even before King Agrippa. And there in Acts 23 the Lord tells Paul just as he is testifying and witnessing of Him in Jerusalem, God is also going to take him to do that in Rome.

Then last week, after the two years of imprisonment in Caesarea, we come to Acts 27 and Paul sets sail. He's a Roman prisoner in the custody of a soldier named Julius. And then Bryan chronicled the journey to Fair Havens, and then from there they made the critical decision to continue on. Bryan took us through the harrowing storm that drove them out to sea, but through which God gave Paul the platform of leadership on the ship. Then they were run aground and shipwrecked just off the island of Malta. And that's where we pick up the story today in Acts chapter 28 and verse one.

**When they had been brought safely through, then we found out that the island was called Malta.** (Acts 28:1, \*NASB)

Just in case you weren't here last week (and even if you were), we need to remember that when it talks about being brought safely through, it's really a pretty amazing thing—important to realize and remember that an angel actually appeared to Paul, and he had told them that everyone on the ship would be saved but the ship would be destroyed as they ran aground. And then things passed exactly as Paul had predicted and proclaimed. So here they are, 276 people washed ashore, and every single one of them has been saved.

Verse two:

**The natives showed us extraordinary kindness; for because of the rain that had set in and because of the cold, they kindled a fire and received us all.**

So just try in your mind to picture the scene on this island. You're living on this island and there are people with their houses and lands. And all of a sudden this mass of people starts swimming ashore, and you find out there has been a shipwreck and hundreds of people are pouring onto the beach. They just immediately begin to show them extraordinary kindness as these guys are coming ashore and they're sputtering, they're soaking wet, and they're standing there lost and shivering in the midst of a rain that is pouring down from this late fall great storm. So the people on the island make a bonfire to help everybody get warm and dry.

Verse three:

**But when Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks and laid them on the fire, a viper came out because of the heat and fastened itself on his hand.**

Now when you read verse 3, our eyes are immediately drawn to that snake part. I'm going to get to that, but I want, first, for you just to notice something about the first part of the verse. Try and think for just a moment what it would be like if you were the apostle Paul and you had just gone through all that he had endured.

First of all, remember who this guy is. Remember what he has experienced of God speaking to him, God using him, the impact that he has had, the way God has directed his life. Then you've gone through this two years of imprisonment in Caesarea. And finally, then, you're setting sail to Rome. You're in Fair Havens and they're talking about where we're going to go on a little bit farther. You're telling them, "This is going to be a disaster; don't do it." They don't listen. Off they go.

Sure enough, you're out in the middle of a storm. But then God comes and an angel appears to you and tells you what's going to happen. Then He uses you to lead them to safety. It's really because of you and your presence and God's directing in your life that 276 people are saved from what would have been certain death.

Now you come ashore. If you're the apostle Paul, how are you going to view yourself? How are you going to respond? How would you act when you're now on shore with all of the people that you have just been used by God to help save?

You know, don't you think it would be easy for us to begin to kind of have a little bit of a different impression of who we are and what we're about? You know, I could easily see Paul, or if one of us was the apostle Paul, standing there and looking at all these people and now beginning to have a little bit of an attitude and saying, "Alright, now we're here, you go and do this...and you go and do this...and I'm kind of going to take charge and tell you all what you ought to do." Or maybe I could see the apostle Paul kind of slipping off and saying, "Okay, you get all the work done. I'm going to pray. God speaks to me, so I'm going to pray and tell us kind of what's next."

That's not the picture at all in verse three. The picture in verse three is really simple. They're sitting there. They're all freezing cold. The people who live on the island start to build a fire. What does Paul do? He just jumps in and helps serve in the most humble way in the midst of the need. **"When Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks"**—he's just going around like everybody else, and he's picking up sticks.

I want us to remember and consider that one of the things God has called us to, as followers of Christ, is to keep a perspective of humility and to remember that we're called as servants. You know, Paul has this attitude because he understands those things. In fact, in 1 Corinthians 4:7, he's writing to the church at Corinth and he says to them, "What do you have that you have not received?" In other words, everything you have—all of the ability that you have been given; all of your gifts; all of your talents; all of your skills—have been gifts from God.

The reality is that in this room are incredibly gifted people, people here who are great in so many ways—people who are sharp, who are able, who are capable. You have gifting in so many ways. And when God uses our gifting, there can be a temptation toward pride.

There can be a temptation toward starting to think of ourselves as something different and to start to view certain things as being literally beneath us. But Jesus made it perfectly clear in John 13, when the God-Man literally washed the dirty, stinky feet of the disciples, then at the end He spelled it out. He said, "I have set an example for you that you also should do as I did."

I want to ask you this morning: What are you doing to intentionally cultivate humility and a servant's heart? How are you seeking to intentionally cultivate humility and a servant's heart in your life?

I've heard of a pastor of a very large church who has a very large staff, including a lot of people who are responsible to take care of all of the facilities and the grounds at this church. But this pastor made a decision for himself and before God in his own heart that he would never walk through that church and see a little piece of litter or paper or something that needed a quick cleanup or whatever—he'd never walk by that without taking care of it himself. Why? Because he didn't want to view those things as beneath him. He wanted to continue to remember he is simply a servant of God.

I read recently about a nursing student who was going through school and came one day for an exam and had been studying all the things that they had been studying in class and was ready and prepared and was just zipping through the nursing exam. Then you could start to hear this kind of murmur going through the room when they got to the last question. People started asking the professor, "What's the deal with this question?" Well, the question was, "What is the name of the lady who cleans the building in which we meet?" They started to say, "Is this a joke? Is this for real? Will this be counted toward our grade?" The professor said, "Absolutely—because one of the most important parts of your education is to understand that you are here to serve people."

What a great lesson for believers, isn't it? That's why God has called us to be here together, to be servants—that we might serve one another. And that's what we see from Paul at the beginning of the story in Malta. Even though God has just used him to lead in an incredible way, it's still not beneath him to just be a humble, simple servant. Though he was truly great and used by God in ways we can't even imagine, he continued to understand that he is called to live the life of a servant.

Verse three again:

**When Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks and laid them on the fire [now the snake part], a viper came out because of the heat and fastened itself on his hand. When the natives saw the creature hanging from his hand, they began saying to one another, "Undoubtedly this man is a murderer, and though he has been saved from the sea, justice has not allowed him to live." (vs. 3-4)**

It seems that the snake was down somewhere under the pile. As they light the fire, the heat begins to take off and this snake is like, *I gotta get out of here!* So it starts to bolt out of the pile and it just happens right at the exact same time that Paul is dropping his pile of sticks. Wham! The thing comes out. Not only does it bite Paul but it literally attaches itself to his hand. So as he lifts his hand up in front of all of these people, there's a viper hanging from his hand.

Now again I just want to ask you, put yourself in that situation. What would be your response if that snake attached itself to your hand? You know, I think for most of us it would be time to panic. We would begin to scream, ask for help, cry for our mommy, I don't know, throw the snake around, raise our hand to keep it away from my heart, no, wait, it's supposed to be down, I don't know where it goes. "Somebody please help me!"

We would have quite a reaction, undoubtedly, if that were to happen to us. And yet, what does the text tell us? It gives the impression that this was really for Paul just sort of matter of fact. It's as if a bug had crawled on his hand. He just shakes it off and goes on as though it's no big deal.

You know, it's interesting too, you have to think about this, that the people of the island, they would be quite familiar with this type of snake. They immediately think, *Okay, Paul is a goner*. And they fatalistically assume that it was because justice is being meted out by the gods.

You see, you've got to remember again, the people of Malta didn't know that Paul was the great apostle. They didn't even know him as the man who had just helped to rescue 276 people. He was just another Roman prisoner who had washed up on their beach. They quickly assume that his crime must have been murder and though he has survived the sea, now he is getting his just payment for his apparent crimes. So they're waiting for Paul to just drop down dead. But Paul just shakes the thing off and goes on, as if it's no big deal.

As you think about Paul in that situation, I want you to just think for a minute, how is it possible that he could do that? How could he respond that way? You think of all that he has been through. You think of the trials that he has faced. You think of what had just happened with being shipwrecked. You go through all of that. Now you're washed up on the beach, and you're freezing cold. You're gathering up sticks, and just to top it all off, the icing on the cake, now there's a poisonous viper hanging from your hand! How do you shake that off and just go on?

Last year I was on one of my trips to India. When we go on these trips, we have a tendency to pack a lot into a short amount of time and we just go from place to place to place. It can be hectic. It can be very draining. Sometimes we'll have 22, 23 flights on one of these trips as we're just trying to do a lot of ministry in a lot of different areas. As a result, it's really important that we make our connections and we get through everything. Sometimes it can be pretty stressful.

Last year we were kind of coming to the end of this trip, and I just have to tell you I was weary. I was tired of India. I was tired of the travel. I was tired of all things and just wanted to finish this mission and get back home. We were headed to southern India and we flew into the city of Chennai, and we actually were just connecting in the airport. We were going to then fly down farther south to the city of Madurai. I was really glad because our flight into Chennai was on time and we had a two-hour window between our flights, so no problem. We get on our flight to Madurai and we're actually going to have a little bit of rest that evening and then do our next thing the next day.

We walk up to the check-in counter and something strange happens. I look and trying to figure out, *Where's the flight to Madurai?* I don't see anything, so I give them my tickets and I say, "Hi, we're here to check in. We're on the flight to Madurai." They said, "Oh, we're sorry. That flight already left." I said, "Excuse me!" I said, "No, you see, this is a flight that's two hours from now." "Oh, no, no, no, that flight left 30 minutes ago." "How can the flight leave 30 minutes ago? See this right here." "Oh, yes, it was scheduled for that time but they changed it. It left 30 minutes ago." "What do you mean, they changed it?" "Oh, well, they felt like the schedule would be better to go earlier."

Well, nice for them. What about me? I've made my plans. We have a connecting flight. Here we are. This is their only flight this airline has to that city that day, and they just...changed it! I have to confess to you, I kind of lost it. I was so frustrated!—like how can you do this? How can you do this to someone? Here we are. We're stranded in India in Chennai in the airport. As far as we know, there's no way now to get to Madurai that day. Instead of getting to the hotel and having our one day of rest on this trip, we're now going to be stuck in the airport for the rest of the afternoon. I'm thinking, *This is ridiculous! Plus, God has a mission for us to accomplish; we've got to get to the city; we've got to finish the work that He has given.*

Well, after taking some time and regaining some perspective and praying and apologizing to the lady at the counter, I began to think to myself, *Why did I lose it?* You know, the truth of the matter is, the reason I lost it in that moment was because for a moment, in that moment, I forgot God. I forgot that there is a sovereign God who is in control of all things. I forgot that that sovereign God is also a good God who loves me more than any person ever has and who is taking care of me in an incredibly good way.

See, I thought for a minute *I* was the one who had to make sure I got to Madurai, and I was trusting in myself and trusting in the airline rather than remembering the sovereign God who orchestrates and allows circumstances to redirect my life. Because I forgot God, I lost it.

So when I get to Acts 28 and I look at Paul's reaction in verse 5, I ask myself, *Why didn't Paul lose it?* I believe it's because Paul understands and he believes in the goodness and the sovereignty of God. You see, years later he would write to Timothy and say, "I suffer these things but I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed and I am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him until that day."

God told Paul he was going to stand before Caesar. So in spite of delays, shipwrecks—even snakebites—he knew that what God had said would come to pass. Paul was confident that his deliverance was secure and that God would bring him safely to his destination.

A month ago, in early February, I was heading back to India again. I was on my first flight. I was flying from Omaha to Dallas, and I was thinking about the trip ahead. I was just spending some time journaling and talking to God on the plane. And I thought back to what had happened in Chennai a year ago. I began to just be burdened, and I just wanted to share with God. I was a little bit anxious about getting on another long-haul flight across the Pacific and all these flights and all these issues and this long trip.

So I just said, *You know what, I'm just going to tell God what's on my heart.* In my journal I just spelled out all my requests: *Lord, this is what I want. This is what I desire. This is what I would like for You to do.* I just laid it all out before God. Then I just stopped and said, *But You are God, and I will trust You.* I just made a conscious decision on that very flight that *whatever You choose to allow throughout this entire trip, I'm just going to choose to trust You, knowing that You're sovereign and knowing that You're good.*

I have to tell you, it was a lot better trip and pretty amazing to watch God show up and have that perspective throughout the trip. You know, even at one point as I was getting near the end of the trip (I had to fly from Vijayawada to Hyderabad and then on from Hyderabad to Delhi) and I was going to go home and looking forward to going home, my flight from Vijayawada to Hyderabad was late. It was delayed, and I missed my connection in Hyderabad. For a few minutes it looked like I might not even be able to get out of the country and go home.

In the midst of that anxiety though, there was a peace—because I knew God is sovereign; God is good. He'll take care of me and He will get me to my final destination.

Now that's such a small example. It's really almost embarrassing to share. You know, we go on these trips to India and people say, "Oh, boy, I feel badly for you," but I've never suffered anything for the Gospel. Suffering is the kind of things we read about with Paul—with being shipwrecked and bitten by snakes and all these kind of things. My illustration is just so small. Why do I share it? I share it because isn't much of our lives not about the major shipwrecks but rather about being bitten by the little things each day?

You know, I think so often for us it's not sometimes the huge things that cause us to forget God. Sometimes it's just the little things that bite at us day in and day out. And it's in those little moments when we either choose to remember that God is sovereign and God is good, or we forget Him.

The question for us is: How do we respond in those moments? In fear and frustration? Or by faith? Do we understand, do we believe in the goodness and sovereignty of God? Do you and I know whom we have believed? Are we convinced that He is able to guard what we have entrusted to Him until that day? Are we confident that our salvation is secure and that God will, in fact, deliver us safely to our destination?

The problem is that we often mistakenly place our hope in the wrong thing. We forget that we are not home. We forget that this life truly is just a vapor and the wonder of our full glorious inheritance in Christ is yet to come.

You know, we're a little bit like a guy who is traveling along the interstate on his way to an inheritance he has received. He has inherited a gorgeous mountain chalet, and he's going along the interstate. He comes to a nice scenic rest area. He decides it's pretty; it's comfortable; it's nice. So he stops and he stays...and he stays...and he stays.

Somewhere along the line he forgets that he was even on a trip. He ends up spending his life eating Cheetos out of a vending machine and talking to truckers as though they're his friends and getting frustrated that the restrooms aren't cleaner.

Now that would be ridiculous...just as ridiculous as it is for us to spend our days trying to find our ultimate fulfillment in the things of this world and this life...just as ridiculous as it is for us to be frustrated by the trials that constantly come our direction because we are sojourning through a fallen world.

As we learned last week, God not only allows those trials, sometimes He even causes them—because He uses them as a part of the calling to make us who He wants us to be and to accomplish His mission as He reaches others. That's just what we see here again in Acts 28.

Verse 5 once more:

**However he shook the creature off into the fire and suffered no harm. But they were expecting that he was about to swell up or suddenly fall down dead. But after they had waited a long time and had seen nothing unusual happen to him, they changed their minds and began to say that he was a god.** (vs. 5-6)

Just as in Lystra in Acts 14, we see again that people are so fickle. One minute you're a murderer. The next minute you're a god. It's another reminder that basing our lives and our value on other people's opinions is a horrible way to live. As he did in Acts 14, Paul probably corrected the notion that he was a god. He uses the miracle as an opening for proclaiming the one true God.

Verse seven:

**Now in the neighborhood of that place were lands belonging to the leading man of the island, named Publius, who welcomed us and entertained us courteously three days. And it happened that the father of Publius was lying in bed afflicted with recurrent fever and dysentery; and Paul went in to see him and after he had prayed, he laid his hands on him and healed him. After this had happened, the rest of the people on the island who had diseases were coming to him and getting cured. They also honored us**

**with many marks of respect; and when we were setting sail, they supplied us with all we needed.** (vs. 7-10)

You know, as I was studying this in Acts 28, I was just reminded and struck that there were some interesting parallels between some things God has taught me in Luke 18 and 19, because here in Acts 28 we find that Paul is on a definitive mission with a clear destination. God has said, “You will stand before Caesar to testify of Me.” That’s where he’s headed. We all know he’s going to Rome to stand before Caesar. Yet Malta was a part of God’s plan for the journey. Publius was a part of God’s plan. His father was a part of God’s plan. The people on that island were a part of God’s plan.

In Luke 18 and 19 Jesus is on a definite journey with a definite destination. He is headed to Jerusalem. If you look at Old Testament prophecy, you come to understand that the actual very day that Jesus would arrive in Jerusalem had been prophesied. So He had to arrive at exactly the right day to offer Himself as the Messiah. So when you get to Luke 18, they are on a mission. They are headed to Jerusalem. There is a big entourage going with Him. They’re coming up to Jericho. The whole crowd is going and they’re moving forward on this triumphal march.

Then on the side of the road there’s this voice crying out. It’s blind Bartimeus sitting on the side of the road and he’s crying out, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” The people with Jesus are saying, “Be quiet, be quiet. We’re on a mission! We’re headed to our destination.” But Jesus doesn’t respond that way at all. He says, “Bring him to Me.” Bartimeus comes before Jesus. Jesus says, “What do you want Me to do for you?” He says, “Lord, I want to see.” Jesus touches him and He heals him.

Going a little farther they come into Jericho. Again, they’re on a mission. They’re headed to Jerusalem. The whole entourage is coming through. There in Jericho is little short Zaccheus, and he can’t even see Jesus for the huge crowd. So he climbs up a tree. And Jesus, He’s on a mission and He’s headed to Jerusalem, but He comes under the tree and He looks up. He says, “Zaccheus, come down.” He says, “I’m going to dine at your house today.” He does. And when He does, Zaccheus comes to faith in Christ.

In both Acts 28 and Luke 18 and 19, you get this picture of the dichotomy—that God is taking people to a destination. He has us on a mission, but He takes us on detours along the way. And the reason is simple: It’s because God cares about people. That’s what the mission is. The mission *is* people.

Look for just a second back at our chapter from last week in Acts 27. In verse 23 Paul is telling them about what’s going to happen. He says,

**“For this very night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve stood before me, saying, ‘Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar; and behold, God has granted you all those who are sailing with you.’ Therefore, keep up your courage, men, for I believe God that it will turn out exactly as I have been told. But we must run aground on a certain island.”** (Acts 27:23-26)

“You *must* stand before Caesar...*but* you must *also* run aground on a certain island.” Why? Isn’t it because of the love of God? God wasn’t punishing Paul by the shipwreck or by the snakebite. God was opening the door for the salvation of the people in Malta. And the outpouring of love that is seen in verse 10 of chapter 28 would implicitly indicate that many lives were transformed during the three months that they were there.

Friends, we need to realize that we are going to get there. We are going to one day receive the full measure of the unspeakable benefits of our salvation and our adoption as beloved children of Christ. But God may very well send a storm to cause you to run aground along the way—not to punish you but to bless others—just as He did with Paul.

Okay, let's move on, verse 11:

**At 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. After we put in at Syracuse, we stayed there for three days. From 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. There we found some brethren, and were invited to stay with them for seven days; and thus we came to Rome. And the brethren, 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. (vs. 11-15)**

What a great joy it was for Paul to finally arrive in the greater district of Rome. This journey through the sea is over, and he's there now on the land. Then Julius, either as a favor to Paul or because he had responsibilities in Puteoli, allows Paul to find the believers and he gets to spend a week with them. And apparently while Paul is there for a week, word gets to Rome, because then they all start to head up the Appian Way, up to the city of Rome itself. And forty-three miles outside of the city they come to this crossroads called the Market at Appius, and there Paul is greeted by a group of believers from Rome who have come out to meet him. They join him and rejoice with him, and they begin to head back toward the city with him.

Then ten miles from there, they come to another crossroads, a place called the Three Inns, and there's another group of believers who have come out from Rome. They join the entourage and they greet Paul. So this procession of people with Paul all go heading back into Rome.

What a time of encouragement it must have been for Paul, because though he had never been to Rome, he had been longing to get there. Three years earlier he had written a letter to the Romans, and in that letter he had shared his strong desire to come to them. Now finally—by way of two years of imprisonment and that long journey he just completed—he is finally there.

Verse 16:

**When we entered Rome, Paul was allowed to stay by himself, with the soldier who was guarding him.**

Again, Paul's primary mission was to stand before Caesar. But just as the judicial process took two years in Caesarea, it certainly wouldn't be likely that it would happen quickly in Rome either. Probably because of the trust Paul has earned from Julius along the journey, he is given great freedom and allowed to be under house arrest rather than to be in prison.

So what does Paul do while he awaits his audience with the emperor? Well, he sets out to do what he always does. Verse 17:

**After 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. And when they had examined me, they were willing to release me because there was no ground for**

**putting me to death. But when the Jews objected, I was forced to appeal to Caesar, not that I had any accusation against my nation. For 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.” 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. But 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.”** (vs. 17-22)

Now here in this section, Paul likely had two objectives. The first is, as was his usual custom, he’s seeking to advance the Gospel by sharing the Good News with the leaders of the Jewish community there in Rome just as he has done in so many other cities. That’s what happens in the next section.

But also, here, Paul is probably trying to get a measure of the lay of the land as he prepares for his audience with Caesar—because, you remember, it was the Jews who were causing him all the problems in Jerusalem and in Caesarea. He probably is assuming they’ve sent letters ahead to say to the Jewish community in Rome, “Hey, he’s coming. Get ready. Get your case together. You’ve got to fight this fight with us.” Or perhaps some had even come being ready to meet him there.

Yet, probably to his surprise, they say, “We haven’t heard anything.” And they indicate either they don’t or don’t want to have anything to do with that, but they do want to talk to him more about this sect—because Christianity had now been there for a long time, and they’re interested to hear more about what Paul has to say and what his views are. So he arranges a time for them to come together.

Verse 23:

**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. Some were being persuaded by the things spoken, but others would not believe.** (vs. 23-24)

There it is again. That’s the same thing Paul has faced in place after place. Verse 24: **“Some were being persuaded by the things spoken, but others would not believe.”** Their response of verse 24 was their response in Acts 14, Acts 17, Acts 18, and Acts 19. It’s the continued refrain heard from place to place, and even from generation to generation. Followers of Christ proclaim the message of His love and salvation, and some are persuaded and give their lives to Christ. But others refuse to believe.

It’s also a reminder that it is not our responsibility to *make* someone come to Christ. Our mission is simply to lovingly present the Good News: To share who God is and what He has done with those who do not yet know and to pray that God would open their hearts and draw them to Himself that they might receive His gracious salvation and experience His amazing love. But God Himself has made it clear that many will close their eyes, cover their ears, and harden their hearts.

Verse 25:

**And when they did not agree with one another, they began leaving after Paul had spoken one parting word, “The Holy Spirit rightly spoke through Isaiah the prophet to your fathers, 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; FOR 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.” “Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will also listen.” [When he had spoken these words, the Jews departed, having a great dispute among themselves.]” (vs. 25-29)**

Repeatedly the Jewish people rejected their Messiah. But Paul said that God had sent the Gospel of salvation to the Gentiles also. And the fact is that so very many have listened, just as he predicted.

Verse 30:

**And he stayed two full years in his own rented quarters and was welcoming all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness, unhindered.**

So for two years Paul stays in this state of house arrest, and throughout the time he faithfully proclaims the Gospel. He helps to build up the Church. And God just gives him great freedom to do ministry in these days as he shares Christ with all openness, unhindered.

Then in chapter 29 Luke tells us...hey, wait a minute...that’s strange...there is no chapter 29. In fact, that seems to be the end. But what about the appearance before Caesar? We’ve been building up to that for weeks. What about Paul? What happens to him? How is it that the Book of Acts just ends here? Is that a fitting conclusion?

If this were to be made into a movie, I have a feeling the reviewers wouldn’t like the end—all buildup and no finish, they might say. It doesn’t seem like a very fitting conclusion.

But you know, I think it actually is, for a couple of reasons. First, we need to remember that the Book of Acts was not written to be the dramatic biography of the life of Paul. Yes, he’s a major player, but telling his life story was not the goal.

Rather, as Bryan told us way back in September of 2005 when we started this series (we opened up Acts 1), the purpose of our study was to understand our calling as a church. The question Bryan asked on that day was: What are we to be about? And what does it mean to live that truth out on a daily basis?

So let me ask you: If you’ve been here through this study, have you grown in your understanding of that? If so, Luke has accomplished his purpose. And I think he’s done an amazing job.

Second, I think this is a fitting end to the Book of Acts because it’s not supposed to be the end. The mission Jesus gave the Church in Acts 1, and that was launched at Pentecost in Acts 2, is the mission that continues until He returns again, as we’re told in chapter one. And that mission has continued: to Rome; then it went through Rome to the western world and throughout much of the earth. Still today, it continues as predicted by Christ in Acts 1:8—to the very ends of the earth.

So the story of Christ building His Church begins in Acts, but it sure hasn’t ended there. Back in November we showed you a clip of a video that chronicles the redemptive plan of God and shows just how that story has continued since Luke set down his pen. It’s worth watching again, I think,

today as we talk a little about the rest of the story as, metaphorically, Acts 29 continues to be written—is still being written—and what God is doing to reach people today.

In their book *20/20 Vision*, Bill and Amy Stearns share more of some of the amazing things that are happening as Acts 29 is still being written:

“Every day another 74,000 people across the globe come to faith in Christ—74,000 every day. That’s 3,083 new believers every hour. An average of 3,500 new churches are opening every week worldwide. In 1950, just 57 years ago, when China closed to foreign missionaries, there were one million believers in the country. Today conservative estimates would say there are over 80 million.”

During the 1990s, that decade the number of born-again believers in the world doubled—in one decade.

As that video showed, in AD 100 there were 360 non-Christians per true believer. Now it’s down to about one in six. Amazing. Truly the story is still being written. The Church is being built. The mission is being accomplished—just as Jesus commanded, just as Jesus promised—and millions upon millions of people have come to know the love of God and His forgiveness through Jesus Christ. And tomorrow the journey will continue—not Paul’s journey to Rome but the journey of God’s people as they reach out to those who do not yet know.

It leaves me, as I close, with one more reason why I think this really is a fitting conclusion to the Book of Acts. The reason? It’s you, and me. You see, if Acts had ended with Paul sharing Christ before the emperor of all of the known world, it would’ve been a pretty cool story—but it probably wouldn’t have been nearly as applicable to our lives, because most of us will never literally be shipwrecked. And most of us won’t ever be bitten by a snake in preparation for preaching the Gospel to an unreached people on some island. And most of us won’t ever share the Gospel with governors and kings. *But most of us could be used by God to change the world.*

Luke has reminded us of the most simple way it happens in his conclusion to Acts. Verse 30 again: “And he stayed two full years in his own rented quarters and was welcoming all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness, unhindered.” Paul lived in his house. He welcomed every one he could. He shared the story of who God is and what He had done with all openness, unhindered.

Now isn’t that a life we could all live? It’s also actually a huge part of how the world gets changed—one life at a time. And that is a fitting conclusion to our introduction to the mission.

*Father, we just want to thank You so much for what You launched in Acts and what You have continued to this day, Lord. It is because someone shared with us that we sit here today. And God, we think about the great apostle Paul. We think about his great life. We think of what greatness is, Lord, and we’re reminded this morning that for each of us it may simply be just faithfulness in the little things on an everyday basis. But Lord, there’s not a person in this room who You do not want to use to help write the story of Acts 29. And God, we would pray that You would lead each of us to understand the wonder of what You are doing in Your redemptive mission in the world—we would understand that we are just sojourning and passing through in this planet and in this world that we might bring others to spend eternity worshiping and praising You. And we just ask, Lord, that You would continue to lead us and give us the ability to do that for Your glory. In Your name we pray, Amen.*

**Study Questions**  
*The Unstoppable Church*  
**A Fitting Conclusion?**  
**Acts 28:1-31**  
Pastor Jeff Petersen

**Opening Discussion**

1. Have you ever set a record or won a trophy, a medal or something similar to this? In that moment, what does it feel like to be a champion?
2. Are your days primarily composed of the “highlight reel” moments of life or just the “ordinary stuff” of life?
3. Paul was the great Apostle. His life had such significance and impact. God used Him to change the world as he sought to faithfully follow and serve Christ. But we aren't Paul. So what do words like greatness, significance, and faithfulness mean in the context of our everyday lives as followers of Christ today?

**Bible Study**

1. Read Acts 28:1-10. Once again Paul encounters another trial on the journey to Rome. This time, just after surviving a shipwreck, he's bitten by a poisonous snake. But how does He respond to what appeared to be a life-threatening event?

How would you respond if that happened to you?

Why do think Paul's reaction is so different than what we would typically expect?

2. How did the people of Malta respond to this situation (see verses 4-6)?

What do their responses teach us about how people may respond to us as we seek to serve God?

3. In Acts 27, God used the adversity of the storm at sea to give Paul a leadership platform amongst all those on the ship. After the shipwreck, all 276 are washed ashore and, to the people of Malta, Paul is just one of the crowd gathering sticks (verse 3). But then the viper strikes and attaches itself to Paul's hand. How did God use these circumstances to advance His purposes (see verse 7-10)?
4. Read Acts 28:23-31. Why had Paul gone to Rome? What had he declared as the ultimate reason God had orchestrated circumstances to bring him to Rome (see Acts 27:23-24)?

In Acts 25 and 26, Paul has the chance to proclaim the Gospel to a Governor and to a King. Then he uses the Roman legal system to provide a pathway for him to present the Gospel to the Emperor of the greatest empire in the world. But when Paul arrives in Rome he is put under house arrest to await his appearance before Caesar. What did Paul do in the meantime?

5. Verse 24 tells us of the response of the Jews in Rome. How did they respond?

What can we learn about our mission from Paul's ministry and the two types of responses he encountered?

6. Do verses 30-31 seem like a "fitting conclusion" to all we've read and studied through the book of Acts? Why or why not?

## Application

1. Is sharing the Gospel with the President of the United States or another leader of the world (like Paul shared the Gospel with leaders in his day) something you are likely to ever do? Are Paul's actions in verses 30-31 something you could do?
2. Each of us has received God's gracious salvation because generations of people have been faithful to take up the baton and to pass on the Good News and to add to the unfolding story of countless lives being redeemed by a gracious God. What's more, at some point *someone* took a step of faith and shared the message of His love and salvation with us and *we* are now a part of the continuing story of the movement of God's redemptive mission throughout generations and throughout the earth. Give a summary of the chapter you hope will be added to the story after your time on earth has come to an end?

How do you want to have been used by God to add to the continuing story of His love changing lives?

3. What is one action step you could take today to help ensure that you don't miss out on being a part of the next chapter being written by God?
4. In four weeks it will be Easter, and we will be opening our new auditorium. Every seat represents a life change story that God wants to add to the continuing drama. Share the name of someone you would like to see come this Easter and commit as a LifeGroup to praying for those people and for each other as we seek to reach out to them.