

Pastor Steven J. Cole
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship
123 S. Beaver Street
Flagstaff, Arizona 86001
www.fcfonline.org

MISSION ACCOMPLISHED

Acts 28:1-31

By

Steven J. Cole

May 5, 2002

© Steven J. Cole, 2002

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture
Quotations are from the New American
Standard Bible, © The Lockman Foundation

May 5, 2002
Acts Lesson 71

Mission Accomplished Acts 28:1-31

Giacomo Puccini was a great composer whose operas number among the world's favorites. Even after he was stricken with cancer in 1922, he was determined to write a final opera, "Turandot," which some consider his best. As his illness grew worse, his students implored him to rest and save his strength, but he persisted. At one point he remarked, "If I do not finish my music, my students will finish it."

In 1924, Puccini went to Brussels to be operated on, where he died two days after his surgery. His students did finish "Turandot," and in 1926 the premiere was held in Milan under the baton of Puccini's favorite student, Arturo Toscanini. All went brilliantly until they came to the point in the score where the teacher had been forced to put down his pen. Toscanini, his face wet with tears, stopped the production, put down his baton, turned to the audience and cried out, "Thus far the master wrote, but he died!"

After a few moments, his face now wreathed in smiles, Toscanini picked up his baton and cried out to the audience, "But his disciples finished his work!" They finished the opera.

The Book of Acts is the story of "all that Jesus began to do and teach until the day that He was taken up to heaven" (1:1, 2). The work that He began was to be completed by His disciples, who were to be His "witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth" (1:8). When we come to the end of Acts, Luke leaves us with the apostle Paul preaching the gospel in the capital of the empire, "with all openness, unhindered." And so, in one sense, the mission was accomplished, with the gospel going to the remotest part of the earth.

And yet in another sense, Luke leaves the story open and on-going. Jesus' followers have been carrying on the mission for almost 2,000 years, but it is not yet thoroughly accomplished. We know that one day in heaven there will be some from every tribe and tongue and people and nation, whom Jesus purchased for God

with His blood (Rev. 5:9). There have been encouraging advances in the cause of world missions in recent years. For example, the Jesus Film has been shown to about 5 billion people. A year ago, film project director, Paul Eshelman, estimated that 90 percent of the world, about 5.6 billion, could listen to the film in their native tongue (*Mission Frontiers*, [3/01], p. 39).

But as yet there are still close to two billion that have not heard of Jesus Christ. We have the privilege of joining the Lord in accomplishing His purpose of being glorified among all the nations! In that sense, the Book of Acts is still being written. Acts 28 shows us how God accomplishes His mission:

God accomplishes His Great Commission by protecting, providing for, and empowering His servants who obediently proclaim the gospel to all people.

Alexander Maclaren put it, these verses show the Christian's place in the world, as an object of divine care and a medium of divine blessing (*Expositions of Holy Scripture* [Baker], 12:371).

1. God accomplishes His Great Commission by protecting, providing for, and empowering His servants (28:1-16).

Paul and his fellow shipmates discovered that they were shipwrecked on Malta, a small island about 18 miles long and 8 miles wide, located about 60 miles south of Sicily. It was cold and rainy, and the men were wet from swimming ashore. The natives showed them extraordinary kindness by kindling a bonfire and eventually helping the men find lodging for the winter. These verses show us God's protection, provision, and power:

- A. God accomplishes His Great Commission by protecting His servants.

Paul didn't see himself above helping out in mundane tasks. As he was collecting sticks for the fire, he didn't notice (perhaps due to his poor eyesight) that among the sticks was a viper, somewhat stiff from the cold. The warmth of the fire caused it to loosen up and it fastened on Paul's hand. He calmly shook it off into the fire. The natives concluded that Paul must be a murderer, and that even though he escaped from the sea, justice had not allowed him to live. They waited and watched for him to swell up and fall down

dead. But when nothing happened, they changed their minds and concluded that he was a god.

Although there are now no poisonous snakes on the island of Malta, that does not mean that there were none in Paul's day. When I went for a hike in Romania with some of the students that I was speaking to, they warned me that there is a viper there whose bite will kill you within minutes. Clearly, the natives on Malta had witnessed the effects of such poisonous snakes before. Luke tells the story to show how God miraculously protected Paul, because God's purpose was that Paul would bear witness in Rome (23:11). Nothing, whether shipwreck or poisonous snake, can thwart God's purpose for His servants until their work is done.

After the winter, the shipwrecked men set sail for Rome on another ship. Here Luke includes another detail that may just be an interesting fact, but it may hint at something more. The ship had for its figurehead the Twin Brothers (28:11), which refers to Castor and Pollux, whom the mythical god Zeus supposedly transformed into gods represented by the constellation Gemini. Sailors considered them a sign of good luck in a storm. Luke may mention this detail to contrast pagan superstitions with the true protection that believers have through God's providence. The reason for their safe voyage from Malta to Rome was not the mythical Twin Brothers, but rather the protection of the living God.

B. God accomplishes His Great Commission by providing for His servants.

God provided for His servants through the unusual hospitality of the natives on Malta. Publius, the leading man of the island, entertained all 276 men for three days, and then he apparently found them lodging for the winter. As the men departed, the islanders honored them with many gifts and supplies (28:10).

God also provided for Paul through a week of fellowship with the believers in Puteoli, about 140 miles south of Rome. The centurion was especially kind to allow Paul to visit these saints. God further provided through the Christians who came out as far as the Market of Appius (44 miles from Rome) and Three Taverns (33 miles) to escort Paul into the city. Can you imagine what the rest of the travelers in Paul's company thought when they saw these peo-

ple welcoming this prisoner as an important dignitary! Paul thanked God and took courage when he saw these Christians whom he had longed to see for several years (Rom. 15:23). God also provided for Paul by permitting him to stay by himself, with the soldier who was guarding him, in rented quarters. Through the generous gifts of the Philippian church and others, Paul's financial needs were met (Phil. 4:10-18).

Paul's case was not unique. If you read missionary biographies, you will find story after story of how God meets the personal and financial needs of His servants who are taking the gospel to the remotest parts of the earth.

C. God accomplishes His Great Commission by empowering His servants.

Although Luke was the physician, the Lord used Paul to heal miraculously many of the sick people on Malta. The first was the father of Publius, who was sick with fever and dysentery. He may have had Malta fever, which could last from four months to several years. In 1887 it was discovered to be caused by a bacterium in the milk of Maltese goats. After this, many others also came for healing. Probably this gave Paul and his companions many opportunities to tell people about Christ.

While the gift of healing to the extent we see here seems to have been limited to the apostles, I have read many stories of miracles from modern missionaries. God seems to grant miracles to a greater degree on the frontiers of the gospel, where people need powerful authentication of its truthfulness.

One of the most gripping missionary stories I've read is *Bruchko*, by Bruce Olson (Creation House, 1978). He left his Minnesota home at 19 with no support and no contacts to take the gospel to the murderous Motilone tribe in the jungles of South America. They shot him with arrows, but he survived. At another point, he was far into the jungle, suffering badly with hepatitis, when two men in an oil company helicopter, out for a joyride over the dangerous Motilone territory, spotted a blond man in the clearing below. One of the men turned out to be a doctor whom Olson knew from years before. They took him to a hospital, where the doctors said that in six hours he would have been dead. They

also told him that he would be in treatment for over six months, and that his liver was so permanently damaged that he could never go back into the jungle.

But Olson knew that God wanted him to reach the Motilones, and so he told the doctors, "You're wrong, I'm going back!" Three weeks later he was released, and a week after that he walked back into the jungle. On the third day, he began to feel dizzy. The chest pains returned. His urine was dark. As he fell asleep that night, feeling terrible, he prayed, "Father, You brought me here to work with the Motilone Indians. Please, God, heal my body." The next morning he woke up feeling fine, with no more pain. His urine was clear (pp. 125-127). He made it back to the Motilones, where he has seen God do many more miracles (pp. 155-162). But the greatest miracle he has seen, he says, has been the changed lives of the Motilones through the power of the gospel (p. 161). His story is a modern example of how God accomplishes His Great Commission by protecting, providing for, and empowering His servants.

2. God accomplishes His Great Commission through His servants who obediently proclaim the gospel to all people (28:17-31).

It seems odd that Luke never reports that Paul preached the gospel on Malta, nor does he report any conversions. Other than the fact that Luke is pressing quickly toward his conclusion in Rome, I do not know why he omits these important details. But I think we can assume that Paul, who never missed an opportunity to tell others about Christ, was not silent for these three months.

When he finally got to Rome, Paul quickly summoned the Jewish leaders to explain why he was a prisoner there. It seems strange that they had not heard anything about Paul, and their knowledge of Christianity, while negative, seems somewhat secondhand and distant (28:22). Perhaps since Claudius had expelled all the Jews from Rome just a few years before, they were being diplomatic and cautious about saying too much. But they were open to hearing Paul's views, and so a time was set.

Paul spent the entire day testifying about the kingdom of God, which refers not only to Christ's future reign on earth, but also to the gospel that brings people under His rule. There was

probably a lot of interaction both ways, as Paul tried to persuade them concerning Jesus, that He is God's promised Messiah. Paul's source of authority was the Law of Moses and the Prophets (= Old Testament). He probably took them to the texts in Moses that describe the Jewish sacrificial system, showing that these sacrifices pointed ahead to Jesus. He would have taken them to Psalm 16, which both Peter and Paul used to show the truth of the resurrection (Acts 2:25-28; 13:34-37). He no doubt took them to Psalm 22, which describes death by crucifixion centuries before this was known as a means of execution. He would have taken them to Isaiah 53, which describes the death of Jesus with amazing detail.

The outcome was, as in many of Paul's previous experiences, some were being persuaded, but others would not believe, leading to a dispute between the two groups (28:25). Before they left, Paul gave his parting shot, quoting Isaiah 6:9-10. Just after Isaiah's rare vision of God, exalted on His throne, and Isaiah's commission to preach, the Lord spoke these words to Isaiah, warning him of the hardness of heart of the people of Israel.

This important text is quoted six times in the New Testament (Matt. 13:14; Mark 4:12; Luke 8:10; John 12:40; Rom. 11:8; & here). Three of those times are in reference to the parable of the sower in the synoptic gospels, where Jesus explained why He spoke in parables, to conceal truth from scoffers, but to reveal truth to seekers. Another time John cited it and then commented, "These things Isaiah said because he saw [Jesus'] glory, and he spoke of Him." The main idea of these verses is that if people close up their hearts to God's Word through His messengers, the Lord will confirm their rejection by hardening them even further. Israel had a sad history of rejecting and even killing the prophets that God sent to turn them back to Him. Finally, and most tragically, they killed God's Son. God's judgment would shortly fall on Jerusalem in A.D. 70, and the Jews would be scattered for 19 centuries.

Paul uses the quote to support his calling to take the gospel to the Gentiles, adding, "they also will listen" (28:28). God's purpose is to be glorified through the preaching of the gospel to all peoples. He accomplishes that purpose through His servants' willing obedience to the Great Commission. Israel should have been a light to the nations, but their idolatry and sin caused them to fail.

Hardness of heart prevents sinners from responding in faith to the gospel, but it never thwarts God's ultimate purpose. There is a mystery here, in that sinners are always responsible for their stubbornness and unbelief, but if they turn in repentance and faith to the Lord, it is not their doing, but only because He has granted it to them (Acts 11:18). In other words, we are solely responsible for our unbelief, but if we come to faith in Christ, it is solely from God, so that none can boast.

While Israel was cut off because of unbelief and the Gentiles were grafted in, God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew (Rom. 11:2). One day Israel will again be grafted back in, "for God is able to graft them in again" (Rom. 11:23). As Paul explains, "a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in." But after this, "all Israel will be saved" (Rom. 11:25-26). There will be a future time of great blessing for the nation Israel, when God will pour out on them "the Spirit of grace and of supplication, so that they will look on [Him] whom they have pierced; and they will mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only son" (Zech. 12:10). Israel will turn en masse to their Messiah Jesus Christ.

But, meanwhile, like Paul, we should commit ourselves fully to God's purpose in the Great Commission. Just as the Lord told Paul that He had many people in the city of Corinth, and thus Paul should go on speaking so that these would come to faith, so we know that He has some from every people group who are His elect (Rev. 5:9). Whatever the hardships, we should commit ourselves to get the gospel to all who have not yet heard.

Though Paul was in chains in Rome, the gospel was not chained. Luke's final word in the Greek text (as in the NASB) is, "unhindered." As he later wrote to Timothy, even though he was imprisoned as a criminal, the word of God is not imprisoned. For that reason, Paul endured "all things for the sake of those who are chosen, so that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus and with it eternal glory" (2 Tim. 2:10).

Luke never tells us the final outcome of Paul's trial or anything about his subsequent life. Probably Paul stayed in custody for about two years (until 62), during which time he wrote Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. When his accusers did not

show up, he was released on default. Some think that he eventually made his way to Spain, as he hoped (Rom. 15:24, 28). He probably visited again some of the churches, perhaps even seeing the Ephesian elders once more, contrary to his earlier prediction. He sent Timothy there to help correct some problems. He visited Crete and left Titus there to minister. During these free years, he wrote 1 Timothy and Titus. Perhaps he was betrayed by someone such as Alexander the coppersmith and arrested again. He was taken to Rome, where he anticipated that things would not go well. From prison, he wrote 2 Timothy. About 67 or 68, Nero executed the great apostle who had fought the good fight, finished the course, and kept the faith (2 Tim. 4:7). Paul accomplished his mission.

Conclusion

Each of us needs to ask, "What about me? Am I as committed to the Great Commission of my Lord as I ought to be? Since God has protected and provided for me, am I relying on His power to do all that I can to see as many people reached for Christ, both locally and worldwide, as I am able?" I close with seven action points that will help you move in the right direction:

1) Ask God to burden your heart with the lost.

Put it on your prayer list. If we are apathetic about those who are perishing, we are not like Jesus, who had compassion on the lost (Matt. 9:36) and who wept over the unbelieving city of Jerusalem (Luke 19:41).

2) Get some training so that you can confidently share the gospel.

We are offering an Evangelism Explosion class this summer and again in the fall. There are many books that teach you how to share your faith. Memorize the verses you need to know to lead another person to faith in Jesus Christ.

3) Inform yourself about the cause of world missions.

Take the Perspectives Course if it is offered again in town. Subscribe to *Mission Frontiers* (U.S. Center for World Mission, 1605 E. Elizabeth St., Pasadena, CA 91104, 626-398-2249; web: www.missionfrontiers.org). It will teach you about the unreached people groups around the world and what efforts are underway to reach them. Also, *Operation World* is an excellent informative book

to help you learn about and pray for the nations of the world. *Global Prayer Digest* (available in our narthex or through the U.S. Center for World Mission) is a daily prayer guide for the unreached peoples. Become a “world” Christian (not to be confused with a *worldly* Christian)!

4) Read missionary biographies.

The thrilling stories of those who have taken the gospel to the remotest parts of the earth will strengthen your faith and will encourage you to get fully behind our missionaries. Read about Jim Elliot and the men who gave their lives taking the gospel to the Auca Indians. Read about John Paton, Adoniram Judson, Hudson Taylor, William Carey, Bruce Olson, and others.

5) Pray for world missions.

The tools mentioned above will help you be faithful in prayer. Sign up for missionary prayer letters and emails so that you can pray as special needs arise.

6) Give sacrificially toward world missions.

We have about 75 young people going out on mission projects that need support. Many of our missionaries are lacking full support. Invest your treasure in missions and your heart will follow your treasure.

7) As God directs, go as a short or long term missionary.

You don't have to be gifted as an evangelist, translator, or teacher to be used in missions. Many missions are desperate for support personnel, as our friend from Wycliffe shared several weeks ago. God can use both young and old in the cause!

A familiar legend tells of a conversation between Jesus and the angel Gabriel after the Lord ascended into heaven. They talked of what had happened down here—of Christ's birth, His life and ministry, His death, and His resurrection. Then Gabriel asked, “And how will the people of the world hear about all of this?” Jesus replied, “Well, I have a little company of friends there whom I have asked to publish it.” “But what if, for any reason, they let You down and fail to do it?” To which the Lord answered, “I have no other plan.” We're it! Let's commit ourselves to accomplish the mission the Lord has entrusted to us!

Discussion Questions

1. Is world missions supposed to be the responsibility of all Christians, or only of those whom God so calls?
2. Agree/disagree: Missions is the ultimate reason the Lord has left the church on earth.
3. How can a person know where he or she fits in to God's purpose in the Great Commission?
4. If a person is apathetic toward world missions, should he conclude that he isn't called? Or, could there be a more serious problem?

Copyright, Steven J. Cole, 2002, All Rights Reserved.