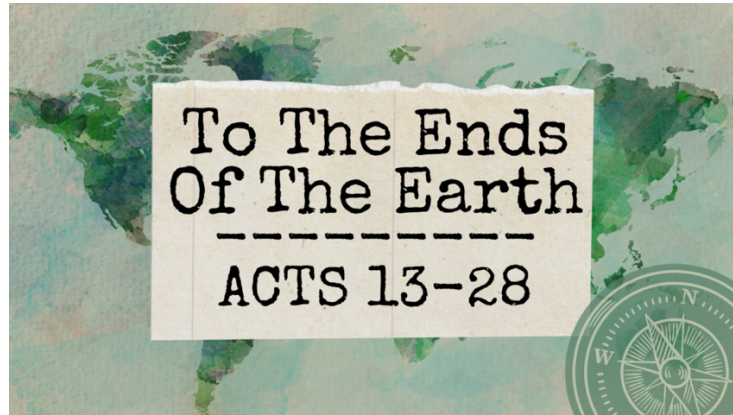


Did He or Didn't He?



Acts 28

Bro Ricky Cunningham

When my kids were smaller and we would travel somewhere a good distance like say Florida, on that trip I knew there was going to be a question that was going to be asked, and I was ready for it. From the backseat, I would get this question, "Are we there yet?" I would have to say, "No, we haven't even got to Cadis yet." And then, right before Nashville, we get that question, "Are we there yet?" I would say, "No, we aren't there yet." Now, after I had answered that question with a no about six or seven times, that question would change. We started getting this question, "How much longer?" Did you have kids like I had?

Back in May, we started the book of Acts, but beginning in chapter 19, Paul made it clear that he wants to get to Rome and I know some of you have been asking how much longer? Are we there yet? We have covered several chapters the last few weeks, so if you are thinking we are there this morning, we aren't, but we are almost there. If you are wondering how much longer, it might be next week, possibly one more week before we

move on from this wonderful book that Luke wrote called Acts. We are going to try to the best of our ability to look at the first 10 verses. Kory and Katie have been at the NCAA basketball games the last few days and I was kidding the grandkids as we were watching the game last night that Pawpaw might go into overtime Sunday, and then I really shook them when I said how would you like for Papaw to go into double overtime? For some reason, they didn't think that was a good idea.

Before I read verses 1–10, I want to tell you what the title of the message is going to be and I want you to try to figure out why this is the title. The title is Did he or didn't he? See, the more I studied this week, the more I kept saying, "Luke, did he or didn't he?" Luke never told me, so I am having to guess that you are having to guess — Did he, or didn't he? Now, we probably aren't going to find out until the end of the message, but I hope when you have the answer you are just kind of grinning at me real big and that lets me know, you know, if he did, or he didn't. We are going to try to answer this...hopefully, before overtime.

Scripture

"After we were brought safely through, we then learned that the island was called Malta. 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. When Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks and put them on the fire, a viper came out because of the heat and fastened on his hand. When the native people saw the creature hanging from his hand, they said to one another, "No doubt this man is a murderer. Though he has escaped from the sea, Justice has not allowed him to live." He, however, shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm. They were waiting for him to swell up or suddenly fall down dead. But when they had waited a long time and saw no misfortune come to him, they changed their minds and said that he was a God. Now in the neighborhood of that place were lands belonging to the chief man of the island, named Publius, who received us and entertained us hospitably for three days. It happened that the father of Publius lay sick with fever and dysentery. And Paul visited him and

prayed, and putting his hands on him, healed him. And when this had taken place, the rest of the people on the island who had diseases also came and were cured. They also honored us greatly, and when we were about to sail, they put on board whatever we needed. [Now, first few words of verse eleven] ***After 3 months we set sail in a ship."***

Did he, or didn't he? Have you decided yet if he did or if he didn't? I hope I don't disappoint anybody, but we are not going to get there this morning. Since chapter 19, Paul has told us, without a doubt, he wants to go to Rome. When this book opened up Jesus gave them the words that after the Spirit fell upon them, they would become His witnesses, and they would start in Jerusalem, go to Judea, Samaria, and then the uttermost parts of the earth. So when we saw the Holy Spirit fall upon the church, I figured this book would probably end with the gospel going to the ends of the earth. But because of the circumstances, I am suddenly beginning to believe that if we just have one chapter to go, we are not going to get to the ends of the earth. It seems like to me that maybe the motive has shifted to Rome. I am just wondering if maybe Paul and Luke believed that if they could just get the gospel to Rome, being the capital of the empire, what might happen?

Paul's Burden to go to Rome

Here is what we know. Paul feels a Spirit-led burden to go to Rome. Now if you remember, just a couple of years earlier he wrote a letter to the church at Rome to let them know he is coming. He tells them he is ready. He tells them he is eager to preach the gospel to them. He lets them know that he is not ashamed of the gospel of Christ for it is the power of God to salvation to everyone who believes, starting with the Jew then going to the Gentile. Then he lets them in on a secret of why he is not there yet — he has been hindered from coming to them. He has been hindered because just about everywhere he goes he finds out there are other places that have not heard the name of Jesus yet. So he is spending all of his time going to places where they haven't heard about Jesus, and he can't go to Rome until all these places have heard about Jesus. He is not going to go

somewhere where they have already heard the gospel and preach there because that is not his ministry Whoa!

See, Paul had this life motto that he wasn't going to go build where somebody else has already laid the foundation. He wanted to lay the foundation for the gospel himself. So what does that tell us? It tells us Paul didn't want to go to Rome to start a church. There was already a church in Rome. Because there was already a church in Rome and because that church was strong, he had been hindered going to them until he had been to all these other regions that hadn't heard. But when there was no more room in those regions, he lets them know he wants to come, but he first was going to drop off a love offering to the church at Jerusalem that the churches in Macedonia had taken up for them. So, he was going to go to them, but he was just going to stop by and see them because where he really wanted to go was Spain, which to Paul, was probably the end of the world. But he wants to go to Rome because he was going to need some help. He was hoping that the Roman church would come alongside him and help support him, and take the gospel to Spain.

But things started changing. He now knew he was going to Rome but it didn't look good for him after that. He had been assured he was going to get to Rome. He had been assured he would stand before Caesar and give a defense, but you didn't hear him talking about Spain. You only heard him talking about Rome. He was not going free, as he thought he would go; he was going bound as a prisoner. When we started the 18th chapter of Acts, Luke, the historian was very detailed, so detailed it makes me wonder why he left me hanging. How did he put these ten verses in his account and never answer that question — did he or didn't he? So now, here I am wondering if he did or if he didn't, and you are now wondering the same thing. Did he, or didn't he?

Shipwrecked

"After we were delivered safely," Luke says. Now, we know he is referring to what just happened. They made a trip from Caesarea, hopefully to go to Rome. He warned the crew, the Roman Centurion...*don't do it! There will be a storm, we will lose the ship, but we won't die.* They didn't listen and

they make the journey. Sure enough, a nor'easter comes and Luke tells us that for fourteen days they were caught in such a storm that they never saw the stars and they never saw the sun. The ship is now wrecked and the soldiers were going to kill the prisoners, but because Julius took a liking to Paul (no doubt saw the hand of God on his life) to save Paul, he will not let the soldiers kill any of the prisoners and the command is given to abandoned ship. Everybody who can swim swims to shore. Those who can't swim (you know if there is two hundred and seventy-six people, there are some that probably can't swim) they grab whatever will float, and just as the angel told Paul, all two hundred and seventy-six people make it safely to the shore. Now, listen to Luke. He didn't say we made it! He didn't talk about what great swimmers they were. He didn't talk about how courageous they were.

See, normally the book of Acts is an action book. The subject is doing the acting in the story. But now, the subject — all two hundred and seventy-six people on board — is the recipient of an action of another. So Luke puts this in passive tense, meaning, yes, they made it through the storm, but not because of anything that they did. It was because of the work of another. I think you and I know who Luke believes delivered them through the storm, and that is God. Have you ever noticed how we don't like storms? If we can help it, we go around storms. If we can't help it, we run from storms. If we can, we try to stop and let them pass because we don't like storms. But sometimes, you find yourself in the middle of a storm. Paul was in the middle of a storm, and it was fifteen days before he saw the light of a star or the sun. Now, he is on a beach and he knows he was there because of the work of another.

Refuge at Malta

Now, I have no doubt that ship had passed through there before. No doubt, the mariners knew where the island of Malta was. It was eighty-five miles south of Sicily, about seventeen miles long and nine miles wide. Luke said no one knew where they were and they learned they were on the island called Malta, place of refuge. Why? Because of the storm. Then, Luke just makes an amazing statement that caught my attention. The ESV says the native people were unusually kind to them. It's kind of strange,

unusually kind. Now, if you read an older translation, some of those translations say the “barbarians,” the “uncivilized” were unusually kind to them. The ESV doesn’t take that direction and use this word in a negative sense, so they basically just call them islanders, or native peoples. But we are translating a word that Luke used, from which we get our English word, barbarian, from. I think that normally when we speak of barbarians, we think of an uncivilized, rough people. Agreed? Older translations go with that. The ESV doesn’t. Here is why. Luke writing here uses a word that in the Greek sounds like — bar, bar. Greek speaking people of the Roman Empire use this word to talk about anybody who did not speak the eloquent language of Greek. If you are a Greek speaking person and you encountered somebody who didn’t speak Greek, it sounded like all they were saying was bar, bar, bar, bar, bar. It is our equivalent of duh, duh, duh, duh, duh.

Have you ever been somewhere where you didn’t understand the language being spoken? Can I be honest? It doesn’t even sound like a language! It just sounds like jibber jabber. Just few weeks ago, we came home from Florida vacation to Disney World. Normally when we are in Disney World, we hear English spoken very little in February. As a matter of fact, if I wanted to go to one place and hear every language in the world, I would go to Disney World. Several times this year while we were there, it didn’t even sound like a language. I was thinking how in the world are they communicating with each other? But then I heard my language, English, and I understood every word. Now, you guys know I am trying to pick up the Portuguese language and have been studying Portuguese. Well, we were at Hollywood Studios in that big attraction, Indiana Jones, and when it was over — as everybody was getting up to leave — about twenty rows down from me I saw a man in a Brazilian jacket. I got so excited! While I was coming down, I was watching and they weren’t moving, so when I got down to their row, I just made a beeline over to where he was. He was facing the other way, so I patted him on the shoulder. He turned around and I said, “Meu nome é, Pastor Ricky. Eu sou do Kentucky. Você fala English?” He went “não.” To which I replied, “Eu falo português pouco porque eu ensino pastores em Brasil do Rio Amazonas.” A big old grin came on his face and we started talking in Portuguese! All of a sudden, the duh,

duh, duh, duh, duh, I could understand — I heard most of the words and I was so tickled! But by the time I quit talking everybody was gone, and all those thousands of people were outside on the street and I was trying to find my family. I only want to find my family for one reason and that is to tell them I met somebody from Brazil and I understood their language. So, when I found Celisa, I said, "Sweetie, you are not going to believe it!" She said, "Where have you been?" I said, "I've been talking to somebody from Brazil and they understood me and I understood them!" We went on to wherever we went next, and then three or four hours passed, and Celisa comes running up to me, grabs me, and says, "Come here!" I said, "What?" She said, "Just come here!" We go around the corner and there is a group of seven people sitting on a bench. She says, "Look, they're from Brazil! I want you to go talk to them and I am going to listen because I don't really know if you tell me the truth earlier when you said you could understand Portuguese and they could understand you, so I am going to listen to you talk." Talk about pressure! Long story short, when I finished and they finished, one of the gentlemen spoke English and he turned to Celisa and said, "He speaks very good Portuguese." Wow...Praise the Lord!

Unusual Kindness

Now, I want you to get this. We all know what it's like to be somewhere when nobody else speaks our language and we can't communicate. Amen? That's what Luke's trying to tell us — except it's not me and my family — it is me and two hundred and seventy-five other people and we just landed on somebody else's island, and they don't understand a thing we are saying and we cannot understand what they are saying. But here is what we do understand, and that is kindness. Luke didn't just say they were kind to us, Luke said they were *unusually* kind to us and welcomed us all! Are you with me? Who is "us all?" It is a crew of a ship, it is a Roman Centurion, it is Roman soldiers, and prisoners. We are on an island that does not have the light of the gospel. So, if we were in a Sunday school class or at one of our discipleship studies and we were talking about fallen men and the nature of fallen men, we would call them totally depraved — how on their own, they can't come to Christ. Yet, this group of people who only has the light of the stars and the sun has a moral compass, an inner

witness that causes them to judge this situation and not just be kind, but to be unusually kind. I have tried to point this out for several weeks. I know it makes some of us really uncomfortable, but Paul has been painting a group of people who has the revelation from him in a not-so-good light, and painting a government that believes the leader is lord in a positive light. And now, we have a group of people on an island, and they are not just kind, they are unusually kind. I mean, I would expect if Luke were talking about the church and there was a pagan ship that lost a crew and part of their military, and part of them were prisoners and they worshiped on our beach, the church would be unusually kind to them. Amen? But Luke is talking about people who don't know Christ.

See, there is a good chance that when Paul and the crew landed on the beach, they could die or they could be enslaved. There would be a fear in having two hundred and seventy-six people ascend into your town on your beach. They could take over. Luke slows down here and says they were unusually kind. They welcomed us all, welcomed even us who are prisoners. What was so unusually kind? They built a fire because it was rainy and cold. There are two hundred and seventy-six people that have just abandoned ship. They have swum in an ocean, in a tide or sea, in a time when it was cold. They were now on land. It was not sunny. It was still raining, still cloudy, and they were shivering, they were cold. Everything they had was wet. All they had was the clothes on their back, and these natives, these islander, these barbarians, so to speak, welcomed them by starting a fire. I don't know about you, but when I first read this, I had this picture...I can just see them making a fire. There are two hundred and seventy people, so this is at least a bonfire. Agreed? But can we be honest? There is something bigger than a bonfire and that is a brush pile. I believe they had gathered so much stuff that we would call it a brush pile. They set a brush pile on fire to warm up two hundred and seventy-six people!

Now, I knew this was going to happen, you knew this was going to happen — Luke has become such a buddy to Paul that he can't tell a story without putting Paul in the middle of it. Everybody agree? I don't know why we call this the Book of Acts; it ought to be the book of Paul because it has been

all about Paul. Luke is going to do something that is just amazing. Why would he stop and even tell this? Do you know what Paul did? Using my sanctified imagination, I believe he looked around and saw two hundred and seventy-six people, saw all those islanders on this beach, and do you know what he did? He started gathering sticks. Isn't it amazing how some people can find themselves in a situation where they are freezing cold, have nothing but the clothes on their back, and they don't look at life from their perspective; they look at life from other people's perspective and they just jump into action. They just serve. Do you ever notice that about some people? Do any of you notice those other people?

See, Luke has painted the picture of Paul, and up to this point right now, he is a prisoner of Rome. But in my mind, Luke is trying to tell us that we may think he is bound but he is not bound. He is really free. He is really free to be who he is, and he is not just a prisoner of Rome, he is a prisoner of Christ. The very nature of Paul is to serve and to be a servant. So in this situation of just being delivered through a storm, while other people are trying to assist him and are welcoming to him, he can't sit still, he has to get involved. He has to help because what is at the very heart of Paul? He is a servant. Now, some of you may be surprised I am saying that because you know a few weeks back, I was pretty hard on Paul. I think that is why Luke is slowing down here to let us see that even though Paul, like us, from time to time did make some mistakes in his walk with Christ, we see his true heart, and he has the heart of a servant. Why does he have the heart of a servant? Because he is following Christ, and even though he didn't walk three and a half years with Jesus like Peter, James, and John and some of the other ones did, he had a special revelation of Jesus on the road and he spent some time with Jesus being discipled. And what he knew was at the heart of Jesus was that Jesus did not come to be served, but to serve and give His life a ransom for many. That was the mantra of Paul. In order to be the mantra of this church, we don't take situations and make it about us, but we do what Paul did and we serve. Why? Because we are a prisoner of Christ. We are a doulas of God. We are a slave of God. We have given away rights to our life. We serve another and because we serve another, we serve others and that is what Paul does.

Circumstantial Judgment

So, get this picture. Paul is coming back and he has this big old bundle of wood. Now, remember, it's raining, it's cold, and there in the wood was a snake. I don't know how you are around snakes, but in Kentucky, there is a difference if you were to run across a snake in, let's say, January versus running across a snake in July. In January, you don't have to worry. In July, you worry a little bit. There is something about a snake that when it gets cold, it just kind of slows down the activity. It just kind of blends in. So, here is the snake...It probably looked like a stick and Paul never notices it. He brings the bundle of sticks over to the fire and starts to drop them, and all of the sticks drop but one, which is hanging on his hand, straight down. Now, could somebody tell me what just happened? The snake got warm as it got closer to the fire, and suddenly realized, I am a snake, I am in danger — and he bites Paul. Agreed? I read some liberal scholars who say this passage does not say, specifically, that the snake bit Paul. How can anybody read this passage and not think the snake bit Paul? I mean, if there is a snake hanging on the hand of a man, somebody tell me, have you ever seen a snake take its hands and grab a hold of somebody? Have you ever seen a snake take its feet and wrap its feet around somebody? No! The snake is hanging from the hand because he is bitten into Paul! When he bites Paul and the natives look at the snake hanging from Paul, they suddenly go... *Whoa! We got a murder in our midst...* "No doubt, this man is a murderer..." They said he escaped the sea but now he is getting what he deserves because justice has not allowed him to live. Now, this is not using the word justice like we use the word justice. This is referring to the Goddess of Justice, who these native people believe was a god who reigned over them, and that justice would be served. So all of a sudden now, Paul, a murderer, has escaped the judgment of the sea but he can't escape Justice, and he is going to get what he deserves and he is going to die because he has killed somebody and he is a murderer. That is what they assume. Somebody tell me they are wrong.

Don't we do the same thing? How many of you hear about somebody's circumstances and the moment you see their circumstances, you make the judgment — what they do? I get so tickled at us in America. We say we

believe and want a judicial system where you are innocent until proven guilty, but everybody that we don't know is already guilty. If a judge and jury don't say what we think they should say, they are wrong, unless we know the person. Now, if we know the person then we think they are innocent, and if they are proven guilty, we don't believe it because here is what we say we believe — we say we believe in justice. Now, we don't have a false god of justice, but don't we have this statue of a lady who has a cloth around her face and she can't see, and she is holding a set of scales? We believe in that justice, that justice is impartial and justice will ultimately make the right decision. Isn't that what we believe?

We see it here. We see a culture who believes that because of circumstances and Paul getting bit by a snake, he is going to die because he deserves to die because he is a murderer. So, they are watching him...and they see Paul just shake his hand and the snake falls into the fire. He just Acts like it is not a big deal. Can I ask you, when you are bitten by a snake, on an island that you hadn't been on before, and there is good chance this snake's venomous, how many of you just shake it off and go about your business? That's what Paul did. Now, I love what Luke does. Luke now paints the picture of all the natives looking at Paul and they are watching him because they think he is going to swell up or that he is going to suddenly die. Now, I get tickled. How can you tell me the snake didn't bite Paul when the islanders see this snake hanging on his hand and now they are waiting for him to swell up or suddenly drop over? You don't do that unless you think the guy got bit by a venomous snake, agreed? Nothing happens to Paul. Paul is not even shaken. He is not even scared.

Paul was Unafraid

Can somebody tell me what is going on here? Is it possible that Paul so walked in fellowship with the Lord that when the Lord stepped in his life and revealed to him there was going to be a storm, that everything would be lost but the people on board, that nobody would be lost because His purpose was for Paul to get to Rome to stand before Caesar so he was going to stand before Caesar, that Paul so believed this that he believed God didn't rescue him from a storm in order for him to stand on a beach and die by a snake bite so he wasn't afraid?

Why are we so afraid of so many of the situations we find ourselves in? Does your call from God, your assurance of God and what He is called you to do steer you through the storm — and when you get on the other side of the storm you don't now think you are going to die, because God brought you through the storm because He has a purpose for you? That purpose is to stand before somebody to give a defense of the gospel so that you can be a witness. Does that make sense?

I had another thought. Do you remember how the gospels end? They pretty well all end with a commissioning of the church taking the gospel to the end of the earth. I love Mark's version. It's one of my favorite versions. "Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up serpents with their hands; and if they drink any deadly poison, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover." So then the Lord Jesus, after He had spoken to them, was taken up into Heaven and sat down at the right hand of God. And they went out and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by accompanying signs." Do you believe Paul believed in the great commission to go into the world? In this day, in the infancy of the church, as they went into places where the gospel was not preached, they were going to cast out demons. They were going to speak different languages. They were going to get in situations where snake bites would not kill them. If they happened to drink something deadly, they weren't going to die. They were going to be able to heal people and them recover. There was going to be signs that would let those pagan cultures see that there is something different.

See, when the native saw Paul didn't die, they changed their minds. Do you know what they actually thought? This guy is not a murderer. He must be a god. They so saw how Paul's circumstance was that they completely changed their minds about who he really was. Can I change the language a little bit? They no longer recognized him as a sinner. They recognized him as a saint of God. Whoa! I just wonder, practically, if some of us

should view our life that way and come to realize that maybe God is allowing some things in our lives so that those things that are happening in our lives reveal who we really are. Are you are the sinner or you are a saint? There are a lot of people who are not going to ever really believe you are really who you are until they see you go through something. When you go through that thing — in the middle of it — God just may give them that sign that lets them see who you are. You are a saint of God.

Paul Heals the Sick

Then, there is all this land around the beach and it belongs to one man, Publius. Do you know what Publius does? For three days, he takes in two hundred and seventy-six people and entertains them with hospitality. Three full days...two hundred seventy-six people! But guess what? He had a father that was sick. He was suffering from drinking the goat's milk. It had a bacteria in it that caused many people on Malta Island to stay sick. They didn't know where it came from. We learned later that we can now treat the germ in the milk of the Maltese goat. It's called Malta fever. Paul visits him, prays over him, lays hands on him, and he gets healed. When he gets healed, everybody on the island starts coming and they all get cured. The word for cured here is different. It's a word that is literally used to talk about someone who takes medicine. (Some scholars want to believe that this may been the first medical mission trip. God brought the sign, Paul healed, but Dr. Luke is on the trip and now he gets to step in and treat people.) But everybody on the island is coming to this group and they are being healed. When they get ready to leave, the islanders honor them and give them everything they need to get to Rome. The next verse says, "After three months, we set sail..." So, they were there for three months.

Did He or Didn't He?

So, did he or didn't he? Do you have enough information to vote whether he did or he didn't? How many of you still don't even know what I am talking about yet? I thought this was about Paul being a witness. I thought this about us taking the gospel to the ends of the earth. Did he tell him about Jesus or didn't he? Luke didn't tell us he did. How can we almost be there, and then Luke not tell us if he did or he didn't? Why these two

signs? Because these signs accompany the message. God didn't give the signs to draw attention to Paul. He gave the signs to draw attention to the message Paul brought. And that's the good news of Jesus Christ. I think he did. And I think I know why Luke didn't tell us he did. It's because we have seen this pattern of sharing the gospel and we are almost at the end of the book. So now we see what happens to man in his life, and there is no mention of the gospel because Luke knows you ought to believe that all of this happened to give Paul and his traveling companions, in the midst of those two hundred and seventy-six people, the opportunity to share the gospel...and he did. Do you know why I think he did? I just think I know Paul. But I also know this...history traces Christianity 2000 years in Malta. After this group left Publius and they all had to find personal lodging, Paul stayed in a cave, and that cave is now called Saint Paul's Grotto. There is now a church on that spot. It's called Saint Paul's Church. There is a street in Malta in just about every city called Saint Paul Street. There is now a church built on that home site of Publius and you can trace the oldest church in Malta back to that home. Church history says that Publius, after seeing his dad healed, accepted the message of Christ and became the first bishop of the island of Malta. If you go to the island of Malta, you can't stand in the city and not see the steeple of a church. Yes, Paul was going to go to Rome, but he wasn't in Rome. He was on a beach in Mazda, and he just did what he knew he is supposed to be doing and that is being a witness.

I think he did. But here is the bigger question...are you, or aren't you?