

Homiletics Analysis: Acts 28

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Acts 28 is the final chapter of Luke's two-volume work (Luke–Acts) and brings the narrative to its programmatic close. The chapter divides into two movements. The first (vv. 1–16) covers Paul's arrival and three-month stay on Malta following the shipwreck of chapter 27: the islanders' unexpected kindness, Paul's miraculous survival of a viper bite, his healing of Publius's father and subsequent healings of the entire island's sick, and the party's eventual departure toward Rome with generous provisions. The second and weightier movement (vv. 17–31) records Paul's Roman captivity: his immediate summoning of the Jewish leaders, his defense of himself and his mission, their initial openness followed by the now-familiar synagogue division upon hearing of Christ, Paul's decisive citation of Isaiah 6:9–10 as the scriptural verdict on hardened Israel, his announcement that the gospel is going to the Gentiles who will hear it, and the chapter's — and the book's — closing summary of Paul preaching “the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance” (v. 31). The book ends not with Paul's fate resolved but with the Word unhindered.

This Text — Intent

God's intent through Acts 28 is to assure His people that the gospel cannot be stopped — not by storm, snake, hardened hearts, Jewish rejection, or Roman chains. The chapter closes the entire Acts narrative on a note of sovereign momentum: the Word of God continues, expands, and reaches its appointed destination. The reader is meant to come away not asking “What happened to Paul?” but seeing that the answer to that question is irrelevant compared to what is happening to the gospel. The passage confronts the reader's functional belief that favorable circumstances are required for God's mission to advance, and it calls that belief idolatrous. God is seeking to produce in His people a robust, unchained confidence in the unstoppable progress of His kingdom — a confidence not dependent on Paul's freedom, political stability, national Israel's cooperation, or any other human variable.

Subject Sentence: The gospel arrives in Rome unhindered — chains and hardened hearts cannot stop the advancing kingdom of God.

Primary Claim: God is declaring, through the final frame of Acts, that His redemptive mission advances not by favorable circumstances but by sovereign purpose — and He is

calling His people to bear witness with the same unchained boldness, wherever they are placed, without waiting for the obstacles to clear.

Interpretive Evaluation

The ending of Acts and Paul's fate

The most widely discussed interpretive question in Acts 28 is why Luke ends the book where he does — without narrating Paul's trial outcome, release, or martyrdom. Three main readings compete. The first (common in critical scholarship) holds that Luke wrote Acts while Paul was still in his first Roman imprisonment, meaning there was simply nothing more to tell; the ending is unfinished because the history was unfinished. The second holds that Luke knew Paul's eventual fate but chose to end on the Word rather than the man — a deliberate literary-theological choice: Paul's story is not the point; the gospel's advance is. The third (some dispensationalists and narrative critics) reads the ending as anticlimactic, a narrative disappointment.

The Reformed reading follows the second option and argues it most fully accounts for the data. Luke has structured both his Gospel and Acts around the advance of the Word, not around biographical resolution. The literary pattern of Acts is: obstacle → gospel advance → new obstacle → gospel advance. The book ends precisely when the Word has reached Rome — the geographic goal stated in Acts 1:8. To end at Rome with the Word unhindered is not an unfinished narrative; it is a completed theological argument. The ending is deliberately open because it invites the reader to continue the story. This reading is to be preferred.

Isaiah 6:9–10 — the hardening citation (v. 26–27)

Paul's use of Isaiah 6:9–10 against the resistant Roman Jews has generated significant interpretive divergence. Arminian/Wesleyan readers often emphasize that the hardening is conditional — the result of Israel's prior refusal — and that the door remains open for repentance (“lest they should turn and I should heal them” being read as ongoing possibility). Lutheran readers tend to emphasize the Law/Gospel rhythm: the citation functions as law-judgment against those who have heard and rejected, with the gospel offer then pivoting to Gentiles. Dispensational readers take the citation as evidence of a formal, programmatic suspension of Israel's covenant role in the present age, with restoration reserved for a future dispensational period.

The Reformed reading acknowledges the Arminian observation that human responsibility is present — Paul is citing Isaiah precisely against those who are choosing not to hear. The text does not present robots; it presents people who “can indeed see but never perceive.” But the Reformed reading goes further: this pattern of hardening is not merely descriptive of one generation's failure but is the prophetically anticipated shape of Israel's covenantal rejection, which itself serves God's redemptive purpose of opening the gospel to the

Gentiles (cf. Romans 9–11). The dispensational reading is to be qualified: while Paul does announce a pivot to Gentile mission in v. 28, Acts as a whole does not present this as a programmatic suspension of Jewish evangelism but as the fulfillment of the covenant promise that blessing to the nations would come through Israel’s seed. The Isaiah citation is judgment on hardened hearts, not a cancellation of covenant.

Malta miracles — sign or providence?

Some Charismatic/Pentecostal readers use Acts 28:1–9 as a template for ongoing apostolic signs, treating Paul’s viper survival and healings as normative patterns for Spirit-filled ministry today. The text itself does not editorialize in this direction — Luke records the events without prescriptive comment. The Reformed reading acknowledges the events as genuine divine acts (providence at minimum; sign-gifts in apostolic context) while resisting the template inference. The healings confirm Paul’s apostolic authority and God’s protection of His messenger, not a repeatable ministry pattern. The islanders’ response (vv. 4–6) — moving from “surely he is a murderer” to “he is a god” — is itself a subtle Lukan irony: the Gentiles misread divine providence through pagan categories, which is precisely why the gospel, not signs, must be preached.

Key Canonical Support

- **Acts 1:8** — “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Acts 28 is the narrative fulfillment of this commission; Rome functioning as the symbolic end of the earth grounds the chapter’s theological climax.
- **Isaiah 6:9–10** (cited in Acts 28:26–27) — The same text Jesus cited in Matthew 13:14–15 against hardened hearers; its use here by Paul in Rome connects the final apostolic confrontation with Israel to the prophetic pattern established at the inception of Israel’s covenant failure, and to Jesus’s own diagnosis of the same condition.
- **Romans 9–11** — Paul’s extended theological treatment of Israel’s hardening and the Gentile mission provides the doctrinal spine behind what Acts 28 narrates historically; “partial hardening has come upon Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in” (Romans 11:25) is the theological commentary on the dramatic turn of Acts 28:28.
- **Philippians 1:12–14** — Written from Roman imprisonment, Paul’s testimony that “what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel” is the apostolic self-interpretation of exactly the situation Acts 28 describes; chains do not bind the Word.
- **2 Timothy 2:9** — “The word of God is not bound” — Paul’s own summary of Acts 28’s governing principle, spoken from a later imprisonment with death approaching,

showing that the theological conviction of Acts 28:31 was not circumstantial optimism but settled doctrine.

Aim: To demonstrate from Acts 28 that the mission of God advances by sovereign purpose rather than favorable circumstance, and to build in the reader a bold, unchained confidence in bearing witness wherever God has placed them.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
28:1–2	Paul and survivors reach Malta; islanders show “unusual kindness” with fire and welcome	“Unusual kindness” (<i>philanthropian</i>) — extraordinary hospitality; pagan Gentiles as unexpected models of care
28:3–6	Paul bitten by viper; islanders expect him to die; he shakes it off unharmed; they conclude he is a god	Lukan irony: pagan misinterpretation of providence; contrast with Roman Jewish hardness that follows
28:7–10	Publius’s father healed; all sick on island come and are healed; islanders honor Paul and provision the ship	Healing confirms apostolic authority; echoes Jesus’s healing ministry; Gentiles receive and respond
28:11–16	Departure from Malta; journey stages through Syracuse, Rhegium, Puteoli; brothers meet Paul at Forum of Appius; Paul arrives in Rome	Paul “gave thanks to God and took courage” upon seeing the brothers — the community of the Word sustains him
28:17–20	Paul immediately calls Jewish leaders; defends himself — done nothing against Jewish customs; bound because of “the hope of Israel”	Paul’s first act in Rome is Jewish outreach; “hope of Israel” identifies the resurrection as Israel’s covenant hope, not a departure from it
28:21–22	Jewish leaders: we have no letters about you; we want to hear your views; this sect is spoken against	Unusual openness initially — a genuine hearing; “spoken against everywhere” is precisely

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
28:23	everywhere Paul sets a day; expounds from Law and Moses about Jesus from morning to evening; some persuaded, others not	Acts' prior narrative Full-day exposition — Moses and Prophets; the synagogue pattern one final time
28:24–25a	Division: some persuaded, some disbelieve; they disagree among themselves as they leave	The consistent Acts pattern: the Word divides; this is its final synagogue iteration
28:25b–27	Paul delivers Isaiah 6:9–10 as the scriptural verdict: “Go to this people and say...”	The weightiest OT citation of the chapter; three prior NT uses (Matt 13, Mark 4, John 12) — Paul joins Jesus and John in this diagnosis
28:28	“Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen”	The pivot; not a cancellation of Jewish mission but its covenantal consequence — blessing to nations through Israel's seed
28:29	<i>[Some manuscripts]</i> Jews depart with great dispute	Textual note: absent from best manuscripts; likely scribal harmonization
28:30–31	Paul in his own rented house two full years; welcomes all who come; preaches kingdom of God, teaches about Jesus — “with all boldness and without hindrance”	The book's final two words in Greek: <i>akōlutōs</i> — “without hindrance”; the climactic word of Acts; not Paul's freedom but the Word's

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	28:1–10	Sovereign Protection on Malta — Providence Before Rome
2	28:11–16	The Journey Completed — The Gospel Arrives
3	28:17–22	First Hearing — Paul Before the Roman Jews
4	28:23–28	Final Division — The Word Divides and Pivots
5	28:30–31	Unhindered — The Word's Final Declaration

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The gospel arrives in Rome unhindered — chains and hardened hearts cannot stop the advancing kingdom of God.

Primary Claim: God is declaring, through the final frame of Acts, that His redemptive mission advances not by favorable circumstances but by sovereign purpose — and He is calling His people to bear witness with the same unchained boldness, wherever they are placed, without waiting for the obstacles to clear.

Applications (Five)

1. Reckon with the gap between what you are waiting for and what God is already doing. (*Mind/belief*) Paul arrived in Rome in chains, under guard, with his legal fate unresolved — and his first act was to summon the Jewish leaders and preach. He did not wait for conditions to improve before engaging his mission. Most of us are waiting for circumstances to become favorable before we act: waiting until the relationship is less strained, the schedule less full, the opposition less vocal. Acts 28 confronts that posture at the root. The question is not “When will things get better?” but “What is God doing right here, right now, in these exact conditions?” Paul’s chains were not obstacles to ministry — they were the venue of it. Name the circumstance you are using as a reason to defer obedience, and bring it under the verdict of Acts 28:31.

2. Receive the comfort that the mission’s success does not depend on you. (*Affections/worship*) The book of Acts ends without telling us what happened to Paul. This is not an accident — it is a declaration. Paul is not the point. The Word advancing is the point. For those who carry the weight of ministry, evangelism, or witness with a sense that if they fail, God’s mission fails, Acts 28 is a release. God’s redemptive purposes were not suspended during Paul’s two-year house arrest. They were not contingent on Festus’s verdict or Caesar’s decision. They are not contingent on your success. Sit with this long enough to let it produce worship rather than passivity: the God whose Word is *akōlutōs* — unhindered — is the one whose mission you have been invited to join, not the one whose mission depends on your adequacy.

3. Stop expecting the gospel to produce unanimity — and stop interpreting division as failure. (*Mind/belief*) Acts 28:24 records, one final time, the pattern that has governed the entire book: some were persuaded, others did not believe. This is the seventh synagogue scene in Acts that ends in division. Luke is not narrating failure — he is narrating the prophetically anticipated shape of gospel proclamation. The citation of Isaiah 6 makes this explicit: hardening is not an accident; it is the form the Word takes when it encounters hearts that have chosen not to see. Preachers and witnesses who expect unanimity will interpret every division as their failure. This passage reframes that expectation: the gospel

divides precisely because it is the gospel. Gauge faithfulness by the quality of the proclamation, not the percentage of positive responses.

4. Let Paul's imprisonment teach you what your most constrained season is actually for. (*Affections/worship*) Paul was under house arrest, chained to a Roman guard, unable to travel, unable to conduct normal apostolic ministry — and Acts records that “he welcomed all who came to him.” The constraint that appeared to end his ministry became the funnel through which all of Rome’s traffic passed to him. This is not a formula (“embrace suffering and ministry will expand”) — it is a theological pattern: God’s sovereignty arranges even the constraints of His servants for the advance of the Word. What season of constraint are you in — illness, caregiving, vocational limitation, geographic restriction? Ask not “When will this end?” but “Who is God sending to me in this?” The door you cannot walk through may be the door through which God is routing others to you.

5. Preach — with full boldness, in the place where you are, starting today.

(*Will/behavior*) The book ends: “proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.” *All boldness* is Paul’s contribution. *Without hindrance* is God’s. Paul supplied the first; God guaranteed the second. The pattern is consistent throughout Acts: God does not remove the obstacles and then call people to witness; He calls people to witness and removes the obstacles, or uses them. The application is not a principle to believe but a concrete action to take. Identify one person in your immediate context — neighbor, colleague, family member — to whom you have not yet spoken plainly about Jesus. Not eventually. This week. With the boldness of someone whose mission is not contingent on outcome.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Acts 28 establishes as the final theological declaration of Luke’s narrative that the sovereignty of God over His redemptive mission is the governing reality of history. God’s Word is not merely able to advance under adverse circumstances — it does advance, because its progress is determined by divine purpose, not human variables. The hardening of Israel demonstrated in the Isaiah citation is not divine failure but covenantal design, connected to the expansion of gospel blessing to the Gentiles in accordance with Abrahamic promise. The miracles at Malta, the unexpected brotherhood at Forum of Appius, the two years of unhindered proclamation in Rome — all witness to a God who uses chains, storms, snakebites, rejection, and delay as instruments of advance rather than impediments to it. The final word of the book (*akōlutōs*) is not a comment on Roman policy; it is a theological verdict on the nature of the kingdom of God.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Acts 28 displays with particular clarity the Reformed doctrine of divine sovereignty operating through and not against secondary causes. Paul's imprisonment is not a second-best providential outcome that God redeems — it is the divinely arranged means by which the gospel reaches Rome. The hardening of the Roman Jews through Isaiah 6 grounds Israel's covenantal rejection not in God's failure to anticipate or prevent it, but in the redemptive-historical design by which blessing passes to the nations — a pattern the Reformed tradition reads through Romans 9–11 as the outworking of unconditional election and the widening covenant promise. The open ending of Acts resists any reading that ties the mission's success to an apostolic figure, a national people, a political structure, or a favorable season — all of which are precisely the false saviors the Keller/Clowney diagnostic would identify as functional idols beneath evangelical anxiety about “the state of the church.” Acts ends with the Word unhindered precisely to declare that the mission of God cannot be held hostage to any of these. Reformed proclamation, grounded here, is freed from both triumphalism (we must produce results) and despair (the results are not what we hoped).

Main Takeaway

The book of Acts ends mid-sentence because the sentence isn't finished — and it won't be, until the last person God intends to reach has been reached. Paul is in chains; the Word is not. Your circumstances are constrained; the mission is not. Stop waiting for the obstacles to clear and start preaching where you are, to whoever is in front of you, with the confidence of someone whose God has already declared the outcome.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Treating the ending as an unresolved cliffhanger rather than a deliberate theological statement.** Many expositors spend significant time speculating about what happened to Paul after Acts 28 — did he go to Spain? Was he released? When was he martyred? This speculation is understandable but functions as a distraction from Luke's purpose. The ending is not unfinished; it is intentional. Luke ends where the Word is unhindered in Rome, because the advance of the Word, not the fate of the apostle, is the point. Spending the sermon on Paul's biography after verse 31 is a category error — it answers a question the text is deliberately refusing to ask.
- **Reading Paul's Malta miracles as a normative template for Spirit-filled ministry.** The viper survival and healings are genuine divine acts, but Luke does not present them prescriptively. Preachers who use this passage to establish a “signs-and-wonders” model for contemporary ministry are importing an agenda the text does not support. The events confirm Paul's apostolic authority and God's protection of

His messenger in a particular redemptive-historical moment. The application is the sovereignty of God in protecting His mission — not a promise that snake-handling faith will produce the same result.

- **Treating Acts 28:28 as a permanent, programmatic rejection of Jewish evangelism.** Paul’s announcement that “this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles” is often read as a formal suspension of Jewish mission — particularly in dispensational contexts. But Paul has made similar announcements earlier in Acts (13:46, 18:6) and then turned immediately back to the synagogue in the next city. Acts 28:28 is a covenantal pivot, not a covenant cancellation. The Reformed preacher should connect this explicitly to Romans 11:26 — “all Israel will be saved” — and resist any reading that treats Israel’s hardening as the last word.
- **Moralizing Paul’s imprisonment as “making the most of difficult circumstances.”** This pitfall reduces Acts 28 to a motivational lecture about resilience and attitude. “Paul made the best of a bad situation — so should you.” This is true at one level but catastrophically undersells the theological argument. The point is not Paul’s attitude; it is God’s sovereignty. The application is not “be resilient like Paul” but “trust the God whose Word cannot be chained.” The difference is between self-help moralism and gospel-grounded confidence.
- **Preaching the Isaiah 6 citation without explaining its devastating weight.** Acts 28:26–27 is one of the most sobering passages in the New Testament — a prophetic verdict of hardening applied by Paul to the Roman Jews as the final synagogue scene in Acts. This is not a mild observation about the difficulty of persuasion. It is a judicial declaration that echoes Jesus’s own use of the same text in the Gospels. Preachers who read past it quickly, or who soften it with “but the door is still open,” are avoiding the text’s actual force. The hardening is real, it is judicial, and it is connected to the expansion of mercy to the Gentiles. Both truths must be held.
- **Missing the significance of *akōlutōs* — the final word of Acts.** The Greek adverb translated “without hindrance” or “unhindered” is the last word of the book. In Greek rhetoric, the final position is the emphatic position. Luke is not adding a minor note about Paul’s favorable conditions — he is making a theological declaration about the nature of the gospel’s advance. Preachers who end the sermon without naming this word and its weight are leaving the book’s climax on the floor. The sermon should end where Luke ends: not with Paul, not with Rome, but with the Word — unhindered.