

We are finishing up Acts this morning. Last week, we saw Paul and his fellow travelers shipwrecked on an island called Malta as they were on their way to Rome for Paul's trial. After some time there, they finally board a new ship for Rome. Let's pick up the end of Acts, beginning in verse 16:

Acts 28:16-31 - When we got to Rome, Paul was allowed to live by himself, with a soldier to guard him. ¹⁷ Three days later he called together the leaders of the Jews. When they had assembled, Paul said to them: "My brothers, although I have done nothing against our people or against the customs of our ancestors, I was arrested in Jerusalem and handed over to the Romans. ¹⁸ They examined me and wanted to release me, because I was not guilty of any crime deserving death. ¹⁹ But when the Jews objected, I was compelled to appeal to Caesar-- not that I had any charge to bring against my own people. ²⁰ For this reason I have asked to see you and talk with you. It is because of the hope of Israel that I am bound with this chain." ²¹ They replied, "We have not received any letters from Judea concerning you, and none of the brothers who have come from there has reported or said anything bad about you. ²² But we want to hear what your views are, for we know that people everywhere are talking against this sect." ²³ They arranged to meet Paul on a certain day, and came in even larger numbers to the place where he was staying. From morning till evening he explained and declared to them the kingdom of God and tried to convince them about Jesus from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets. ²⁴ Some were convinced by what he said, but others would not believe. ²⁵ They disagreed among themselves and began to leave after Paul had made this final statement: "The Holy Spirit spoke the truth to your forefathers when he said through Isaiah the prophet: ²⁶ "Go to this people and say, "You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving." ²⁷ For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.' ²⁸ "Therefore I want you to know that God's salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen!" ²⁹ ³⁰ For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. ³¹ Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ.

I want to use this last section to highlight three main points of Acts:

1) Jesus is the hero

When you get to the end of Acts 28, it really feels like an anticlimactic ending.

After all these chapters about Paul's conversion, training, missionary journeys, and then being persecuted, arrested, and heading to Rome for his trial, we're not even told what happens to him. Did he live? Was he executed? How did the trial go? We aren't told here.

Now, from church history, we know that Paul was executed by Nero, the Roman Caesar who persecuted many Christians. But before that, while he was imprisoned in Rome, he wrote letters to churches, including Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon.

But reading through Acts, we don't know why Luke ends his account the way he did. Whatever the reason is, I think that the ending is fitting. Because Acts is not about Paul. He is not the hero of the story. Jesus is the hero. **Jesus lived the perfect life we could not live. Jesus died a sacrificial death on the cross in our place. Jesus rose from the dead, conquering sin and death. Jesus is the one who can save you from eternal separation from God. Jesus is the Savior. Jesus is Lord.** In fact, that is the last thing said in Acts: Paul is pointing people to the Lord Jesus Christ. And that is the way it always should be.

Listen to me: pastors and teachers will come and go. Churches will come and go. In your life, how many of you can say that? In fact, even Christian nations or regions will rise and fall. Think of how the center of Christianity has moved, from the Middle East and Northern Africa to Europe, to North America, and now to the global South: Latin America, Africa. And now it is growing exponentially in Asia, particularly Korea and China.

For those distraught by how Christianity is waning in America, just look at the global state of Christianity today: 631 million in Africa, 601 million in Latin America, 571 million in Europe, 388 million in Asia, 277 million in North America, and 29 million in Oceania. **Christianity is not about one person, or church, or culture. It is about Jesus. Jesus is the hero of the story.**

When I was in college, I led small group Bible studies as part of a group called InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. Every year, people in InterVarsity would be assigned to a small group. I remember my senior year, I heard that someone who had been in my group the previous year had stopped going to the group she was in the following year because, as she put it, "it's not like the one Eric led." Now, admittedly, the immature and self-centered part was puffed up as my pride was fed. But the spiritual part of me realized that if that was this young woman's attitude, then I had utterly failed as her shepherd. Because if Bible study, or church, is about

me in any way, then we are all on shaky ground. I am not the hero of this story. Jesus is the hero of the story. Jesus is the one who can save you, who can transform you, who deserves your worship. **And anything good that you see in me or any other Christian is no more than a gift given to me by Jesus Christ.** Listen to how Paul reacted when he heard something similar happening in Corinth:

1 Corinthians 1:11-13,17 - My brothers, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. What I mean is this: One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos "; another, "I follow Cephas"; still another, "I follow Christ." Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul?... Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel-- not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

Listen to Paul: Jesus sent me to preach the gospel, the good news that forgiveness of sins and eternal life is found in Jesus Christ.

1 Corinthians 15:1-8 - Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. ² By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. ³ For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, ⁵ and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. ⁶ After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, ⁸ and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

It's not about Paul or Apollos or Cephas – it's about Christ! And it is still not about any person, or church, or even nation or region. It is all about Jesus. He is Lord. He is Savior. Do not put your hope in any human being or any church. Put your hope in the one to whom we are all pointing. And if you end up in a different city, or church, or under a different pastor, keep seeking Jesus, and keep serving Jesus, and keep pointing people to Jesus. He is the hero of the story.

Think of the disciples of John the Baptist:

John 3:26-30 - They came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan-- the one you testified about-- well, he is baptizing, and everyone is going to him." ²⁷ To this John replied, "A man can

receive only what is given him from heaven. ²⁸ You yourselves can testify that I said, 'I am not the Christ but am sent ahead of him.' ²⁹ The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. ³⁰ He must become greater; I must become less.

You and I are not meant to be the focal point any more than the best man is meant to be the focal point of the wedding. It's about the groom. It's about Jesus. He must become greater; we must become less. No matter what happens to us, it does not matter, because our lives are about pointing to Jesus.

2) The Holy Spirit is the power

Acts 28:25-26 - They disagreed among themselves and began to leave after Paul had made this final statement: "The Holy Spirit spoke the truth to your forefathers when he said through Isaiah the prophet: ²⁶ "Go to this people and say, "You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving."

Just as the hero of the story is Jesus, the only reason that Isaiah, or Paul, or Peter, or you or I can do anything of spiritual significance is by being led by God's Holy Spirit. This book is known as the Acts of the Apostles, but it could just as easily been called the Acts of the Holy Spirit. Acts is filled with incredible growth and expansion of the church and miraculous deeds. But do not forget how this all started back in the beginning of Acts:

Acts 1:4-8 - On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. ⁵ For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." ⁶ So when they met together, they asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" ⁷ He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

And on the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was sent by God and came to reside inside each believer, and the course of history was forever changed.

1 Corinthians 6:19-20 - Do you not know that your body is a **temple** of the **Holy Spirit**, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; ²⁰ you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.

God no longer lives in temples. God dwells in you by His Holy Spirit. Because Jesus has ascended, we don't just have a Jesus in the flesh on the earth, but instead we have God within each of us by His Holy Spirit, purifying and empowering us to be transformed into the men and women God has created us to be.

Ephesians 1:18-21 - I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, ¹⁹ and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, ²⁰ which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, ²¹ far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come.

The same power that raised Jesus from the dead lives in you. By the power of the Holy Spirit, you have spiritual life and you have been given spiritual gifts.

2 Timothy 1:7 - For God did not give us a spirit of **timidity**, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline.

One of my favorite accounts of the difference the Spirit makes is from the life of D.L. Moody:

In the summer of 1871 two women of Dwight L. Moody's congregation felt an unusual burden to pray for Moody "that the Lord would give him the baptism of the Holy Ghost and of fire." Moody would see them praying in the front row of his church and he was irritated. But soon he gave in and in September began to pray with them every Friday afternoon. He felt like his ministry was becoming a sounding brass with little power. On November 24, 1871, Moody's church building was destroyed in the great Chicago fire. He went to New York to seek financial help. Day and night he would walk the streets desperate for the touch of God's power in his life. Then suddenly,

One day, in the city of New York—oh, what a day!—I cannot describe it, I seldom refer to it; it is almost too sacred an experience to name . . . I can only say that God revealed himself to me, and I had such an experience of his love that I had to

*ask him to stay his hand. I went to preaching again. The sermons were not different; I did not present any new truths, and yet hundreds were converted. I would not now be placed back where I was before that blessed experience if you should give me all the world—it would be small dust in the balance. (W. R. Moody, *The Life of D. L. Moody*, New York: 1900, p. 149)*

That same Spirit that indwelled the early believers and indwelled D.L. Moody lives in you. Apart from him, you can do nothing. Anything that has any spiritual value or impact in us is because of God's Spirit inside of us. So walk by the Spirit! Seek Him and rely upon Him and ask Him to do what only He can do through us!

3) The kingdom of God is the mission

Acts 28:31 - Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ.

We do not live in a land of kings. But the simplest definition of the kingdom of God is that the kingdom of God is wherever God is king. It is wherever people call Him Lord. It is wherever people love and treat each other as God intended. Wherever we are loving our neighbor as ourselves, we are building God's kingdom. Remember Acts 2:42-47, the early church after Pentecost:

Acts 2:42-47 - They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³ Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵ Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. ⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

They were devoted to Jesus, to the gospel, to growing in God's truth. But they were also devoted to community, to caring for each other's needs. And the kingdom grew daily. God's good reign expanded.

We are still called to expand His kingdom by preaching the gospel and by loving our neighbor. In the words of the Great Commission and the Great Commandment:

Matthew 28:18-20 - Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

Matthew 22:35-40 - One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: ³⁶ "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" ³⁷ Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' ³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹ And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' ⁴⁰ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

Nothing else is worth giving your life to. The mission you are called to involves the eternal destiny of every human being, the transformation of our world from hate to love, from sorrow to joy, from discord to peace. What part can you play? The story of Acts is the story of a community that changed the world as they pointed people to Jesus and shared the gospel and expanded God's kingdom empowered by His Holy Spirit.