

The End of the Beginning

Acts 28:17-31

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Today marks our final message in our study of the book of Acts. I believe I've preached 53 sermons as we have worked our way through the 28 chapters of Acts. We've been in Acts for a bit over a year. Today, we reach the end of the book. Acts, however, is really about the beginning stage of the development of the church. So while we are reaching the end of Acts, we aren't reaching the end of the story. It's just the end of the beginning.

The second half of Acts basically follows Paul's journeys throughout the region as a missionary. We have seen Paul travel on three missionary journeys, with different partners and traveling companions at various points. The final stage of Paul's account in Acts is the story of him making his way to Rome. For weeks we have followed the ups and downs of Paul's misadventures at the hands of the Roman and Jewish legal systems. The process of Paul getting to Rome took almost 3 years' time. We might think that after arriving in Rome, Paul would begin a new ministry. And in a sense, that's exactly what he did. But his approach would necessarily be different than it had been on his other missionary journeys. Once again, we'll get to see Paul be creative and diligent, choosing to find ways to minister in his given context, even when it was less than ideal.

Paul and the Jewish Leaders

At this point in the book of Acts, we should be familiar with Paul's typical pattern of ministry when he came to a new city. Once he got settled, he would find the local synagogue and reason with the Jews there, hoping to convince them of the truth of the gospel message. He would try to show them that Jesus was the Messiah. Almost always, he would eventually be told to go away, at which point he would dedicate his efforts solely on the Gentiles. Though Paul was still in Roman custody, he attempted to follow the same basic pattern here as well.

¹⁷ Three days after Paul's arrival, he called together the local Jewish leaders. He said to them, "Brothers, I was arrested in Jerusalem and handed over to the Roman government, even though I had done nothing against our people or the customs of our ancestors. ¹⁸ The Romans tried me and wanted to release me, because they found no cause for the death sentence. ¹⁹ But when the Jewish leaders protested the decision, I felt it necessary to appeal to Caesar, even though I had no desire to press charges against my own people. ²⁰ I asked you to come here today so we could get acquainted and so I could explain to you that I am bound with this chain because I believe that the hope of Israel—the Messiah—has already come."

²¹ They replied, "We have had no letters from Judea or reports against you from anyone who has come here. ²² But we want to hear what you believe, for the only thing we know about this movement is that it is denounced everywhere." (Acts 28:17-22, NLT)

We saw at the end of our passage last week that Paul was permitted to live in a rented house, but he was essentially under house arrest. A Roman guard would have been chained to his wrist at all times. For Paul, this still provided freedom to carry on ministry, albeit in a different form than he was used to. Instead of being able to go to the synagogues, they would need to come to him.

Paul sent word to the local Jewish leaders, asking them to come to his house, where he could tell them a bit about his story. He was attempting to build a bridge with these leaders, in hopes of gaining a hearing among them. He told them a couple of different things.

First, he had never done anything against the Jewish people. This was an important point for Paul. He loved the Jewish people. He would never want to do something that would hurt them. On the contrary, he wanted to assure these Jews in Rome that even though the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem had made all sorts of charges against him, he was a friend of the Jews, not their enemy.

Second, he hadn't broken any Roman laws. He pointed out that all the non-Jewish leaders back in Israel had concluded he was innocent and could be released. But the Jewish leaders wanted to silence Paul, which is why he had remained in prison.

Third, he had appealed to Caesar but had not made any countercharges. In most legal proceedings today, if someone sues you, you will issue a countersuit. The idea is that you want to be clear that the other party is guilty, not you. Paul pointed out that while he appealed his case to Caesar, he hadn't issued any countercharges against the Jews. This was further evidence that Paul didn't want to make things more difficult for his Jewish brethren. He was just trying to be set free as he deserved.

Finally, he told them that he believed the Messiah had already come, and that this Messiah was Jesus. This was, of course, the crux of Paul's argument, but he had tried to remove any potential obstacles that might prevent them from at least giving him a hearing.

The Jewish leaders responded, somewhat surprisingly, that they hadn't been told anything about Paul from the Jews back in Israel. They assumed that if he was as dangerous as they claimed, they would have sent a letter of warning or something to that effect. But they hadn't. Whether the Jews in Israel simply were glad to have him out of their hair or had basically given up, we can't be sure, but the Jewish leaders in Rome knew nothing about Paul either positive or negative.

The one thing they did know though, was that everyone seemed to talk negatively about the Christians. They had heard that Christianity was being denounced everywhere. But no one had explained their beliefs to them. So Paul invited them and any others who were interested to come back a second time, where he would explain the gospel message fully.

The Second Visit

Luke records what happened at this second visit immediately after.

²³ So a time was set, and on that day a large number of people came to Paul's lodging. He explained and testified about the Kingdom of God and tried to persuade them about Jesus from the Scriptures. Using the law of Moses and the books of the prophets, he spoke to them from morning until evening. ²⁴ Some were persuaded by the things he said, but others did not believe. (Acts 28:23-24, NLT)

Apparently at this second visit there were more than just the religious leaders in attendance, since Luke said a large number of people came to the place where Paul was staying. While we don't know exactly how many were there, the size of the crowd seems to have impressed Luke. Paul's rented home must have been quite large, since it was possible for him to accommodate this group there.

Paul was well-practiced in sharing the gospel message by this point. Since he knew the group was primarily Jewish, he focused primarily on the scriptures. He took them through passages they would have already known and helped them see how these passages pointed to the Messiah and were fulfilled by Jesus!

Luke says this went on all day. This was probably not merely a lecture from Paul. Jewish rabbis learned by debate. So there was surely a fair bit of give and take as Paul sought to connect the dots for the Jews gathered there. It was probably a lively, and maybe even intense, discussion throughout the day.

At the conclusion of the evening, Luke says some were persuaded, while others were not. This doesn't necessarily mean that some had embraced Christ (though they might have), but that they were beginning to have the lights come on in their hearts and minds. Still others, however, remained hard-hearted to the gospel. We can assume they began to dismiss Paul and condemn him as a false teacher. This wasn't new of course, but it was disheartening to Paul.

So Paul quoted to them from the prophet Isaiah. He said that like the people of Isaiah's day, they were hearing but not understanding, seeing but not comprehending, with hardened hearts and deafened ears. And because of their hard hearts, they would miss out on the blessing of the fulfillment of God's promise. He turned his back on the Jews, and as Paul did on several other occasions, declared that he would now turn his attention to the Gentiles.

An Abrupt End

Luke ends his account of the beginning of the early church somewhat abruptly, giving us a bit of information, but not much.

³⁰ For the next two years, Paul lived in Rome at his own expense. He welcomed all who visited him, ³¹ boldly proclaiming the Kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ. And no one tried to stop him. (Acts 28:30-31, NLT)

Paul ended up in prison in Rome for another two years (making this whole ordeal last nearly 5 years in total). But even though he was on house arrest and was chained to a guard, that did not stop Paul from doing ministry. Since he was in his own house, he often welcomed visitors, and it appears he continued to do ministry.

We know Paul continued to teach people about Jesus, even though he wasn't able to leave his house. We can only assume that the other Christians in Rome helped bring people to Paul, so he could take time with them and explain the way of Christ fully. Paul did not allow his circumstances to dissuade him from the task at hand!

We also know that Paul wrote several letters during this time. These letters are often called Paul's "prison epistles", as he likely wrote them during this time of imprisonment in Rome. Most people believe Paul's letters of Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians were written while he was in prison in Rome. He also likely wrote his letter to Philemon during this time.

Paul continued to stay busy. We know from his letter to the Philippians that he had even begun to make an impact on the Roman soldiers who were guarding him!

¹² And I want you to know, my dear brothers and sisters, that everything that has happened to me here has helped to spread the Good News. ¹³ For everyone here, including the whole palace guard, knows that I am in chains because of Christ. ¹⁴ And because of my imprisonment, most of the believers here have gained confidence and boldly speak God's message without fear. (Philippians 1:12-14, NLT)

Paul saw opportunities in his situation and seized upon them. He said that everyone he encountered knew his story, including the whole palace guard! I suspect Paul had utilized the time he had where he was chained to his guards to begin telling them about who God was and what He had done in Paul's life. It seems quite likely that over time, some of these men may have come to believe just as Paul had. I suspect that as time went on, guards may have been lining up to guard Paul. They knew it was an easy assignment (Paul wasn't dangerous or a flight risk), and they'd have a chance to learn more about Jesus from him. Paul recognized the importance of being a witness for Christ wherever he was, and in every situation he found himself.

Postscript

Luke ends his account by telling us that Paul remained there and continued teaching about Jesus, and that no one tried to stop him. It seems somewhat strange to us that Luke didn't tell us about how Paul's situation ended up. We would have liked to hear about Paul's trial before Caesar and learned what happened after that. But Luke didn't record those things, because that wasn't his focus in writing this book. His focus wasn't to tell Paul's story, but God's. Luke's goal was to show how a small group of believers in Jerusalem had been used by God to make an impact across much of the world by this point, and it ended with the gospel being preached in the most powerful place on earth, Rome. Luke had accomplished his purpose, so he ended his account.

Many do wonder what happened to Paul though. We can piece together a probable epilogue based on Paul's writings and some of the writings of the early church. It seems that after his two years in prison, he was released. We don't know if this was because they had two years to bring charges and nothing had happened so the charges were dropped, or whether he was tried and acquitted. But most scholars believe Paul was released from prison after this experience.

Many believe Paul enjoyed an additional time of traveling and preaching as he had before. He had mentioned in his letter to the Romans that he hoped to visit Spain, so that seems like a reasonable destination for Paul after his release. Paul may have written 1 Timothy and Titus during this time when he was free once more.

We do know that when Paul wrote 2 Timothy, he was in prison again, and expected that the end of his life was near. Many believe Paul returned to Rome sometime after the great fire of Rome. You may have heard of the story of Nero "fiddling while Rome burned". There was a massive fire that destroyed three fourths of the city. Many suspected that Nero had set the fire as a way of making space for a new palace for himself. Rumors began to circulate that while the city burned, Nero sat in his palace and played the fiddle as he watched. Most scholars today believe that was probably not the case, however.

What is certain, however, is how Nero responded. He blamed the Christians for the fire and executed many. While there is no reason to believe Paul had anything to do with the fire, many suspect that Paul may have been among the Christians that Nero chose to execute.

None of this is included in the book of Acts, however, or anywhere else in scripture. The end of Paul's story is left for us to piece together from his writings and from the accounts of other early Christians.

Conclusion

Luke didn't include the details of the final years of Paul's life because that wasn't his purpose. Luke wanted his readers to see how God had worked through the early Christians to cause the gospel message to spread far and wide. Starting with just a handful of Christians hiding in Jerusalem, a few decades later the church was vibrant and growing on at least 3 continents! The main character of Acts is not Peter or Paul, but God!

As we conclude our study, I want to draw some principles for us to learn both from this passage and the book of Acts as a whole.

First, history is His story, not ours. All of history is the unfolding and revealing of God's plan. The book of Acts records the history of the first generation of the church. That story is not the story of Peter and Paul; it's the story of the Holy Spirit making an impact in our world. Similarly, the subsequent years of church history are not about Augustine, Luther, Calvin, or Wesley. All the stories we see tell of God's hand working

through individuals. That is true for us too. Sometimes we forget that God is the main character of the story. We imagine that all of life is primarily about us. It's not. This means the purpose of our lives, and the purpose of all we do is to manifest God's character and His glory, and to execute God's plan in our world. When we keep that concept straight in our minds, our perspective on who we are, why we are here, and how we view the circumstances of life changes along with it.

Second, God can do amazing things through ordinary people. Every page of the book of Acts is a reminder that God does amazing works through people who are just like you and me. Peter, Paul, Philip, Luke, Barnabas, Silas, Timothy, and Stephen were not superhuman. They were men who trusted God and did what He said. They lived out their faith and got a front row seat to what God was doing. God can use us in the same way if we're willing to trust Him as they did.

Third, God is writing the next chapter through us. Acts is not the end of the story of God's work; it is merely the end of the first chapter. We are living out and writing the next chapter even today. When we recognize that God is working through us just as he was the early disciples it should give us a renewed focus and energy, and hopefully a level of excitement that He can use you and me to accomplish the next part of His story. We just need to be willing to play our parts.

Fourth, don't allow your circumstances to distract you from the task before you. If there's one thing that should be plain throughout our study of Acts, it's that the early Christians were unwilling to allow bumps in the road to keep them from doing what God had asked of them. Things will not always be easy, but we must choose to see the obstacles as challenges, as opportunities to be creative in the ways we serve the Lord. We must keep doing what we know God has called us to do, and what we know is right, no matter what life brings our way or the odds stacked against us.

Finally, the gospel doesn't change. If you look at the message Peter preached on the day of Pentecost in chapter 2 and the message Paul preached to the Jews in chapter 28, you'll notice it's the same message. They both emphasize that we are sinners who need a Savior. We cannot save ourselves. But Jesus came so that we might have forgiveness and new life. But this truth demands a response from us. It requires us to act. It calls us to repentance and a new life of faith in Jesus. The message remains the same today. It calls to you and me. And we should share it with those we encounter in our day as well.

The world of 2,000 years ago is in many ways very different from our world today. But in many far more important ways, it's very much the same. The same God is on the throne. We face the same problems of sin, pride, and selfishness. And the solution remains the same: faith in Jesus Christ alone is the only remedy to all these things. And one other thing remains true as well: God is writing the next chapter of His story the same way He wrote the first one: through ordinary people. May you and I be willing to carry out the job He's given us, just as the men and women of Acts were.

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