

Introduction:

As we come to the end of Acts, we should remember how Luke began this letter. In Acts 1:1–8, Luke says his first letter (the gospel of Luke) dealt with “all Jesus began to do and teach, until the day he was taken up.” Then, he recounts Christ’s final moments on the earth, “speaking about the kingdom of God” and proclaiming the coming Holy Spirit would empower the disciples to be His “witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” This indicated Acts would be a continuation of Christ’s work and teaching through the Spirit empowered people of God spreading the kingdom of God throughout the world. And we have seen just that, as story after story has shown the Spirit moving powerfully through God’s new covenant people to accomplish these things. Our final passage this morning brings this letter to a close in a fitting way, though unusual, and we can observe it in two sections. First, as we see them come to Rome in verses 11-28, we see,

Paul Strengthened by God’s Faithfulness & Boldly Proclaiming Christ’s Kingdom

Consider the focus of verses 11-16. Notice how Luke begins in verses 11-14. After quickly detailing Paul’s travels from Malta, he slows down when arriving at Puteoli, the main entry point to Rome from the east. They find believers there and stay with them for seven days, which was a welcomed rest before their difficult 130-mile journey by foot to Rome through some hill country and 19 miles of marshland. This welcome and hospitality by believers sets the stage for what comes next. Look at the end of verse 14 through verses 16, “And so we came to Rome. And the brothers there, when they heard about us, came as far as the Forum of Appius and Three Taverns to meet us. On seeing them, Paul thanked God and took courage. And when we came into Rome, Paul was allowed to stay by himself, with the soldier who guarded him.” Luke says they came to Rome in verse 14, but details their travel to Rome in verse 15, before they actually arrive in Rome in verse 16. What’s going on here? I am persuaded the end of verse 14 is meant to be anticipatory, alerting us to pay attention to his description of their travels. So, what do we see? First, believers met Paul in staggered locations at the Forum of Appius, forty-three miles from Rome, and Three Taverns, thirty-three miles from Rome. The moment Paul set foot in Puteoli, he is greeted by believers, and more greet him along the way like a king’s people would greet him outside the capital city to usher him in. Second, Luke mentions Paul “thanked God and took courage” from this. Think about this with me. What caused this for Paul? This three-stage greeting by believers revealed the Spirit was already active in Rome. Perhaps Paul remembered the vision he received at Corinth in Acts 18:9–10, when Jesus said, “Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people.” Paul found strength from the Spirit’s presence and activity in Rome. Strength he would need. Continue in verses 17-22. In verses 17-18, Paul calls the local Jewish leaders together to make a defense, recounting what happened in Jerusalem and proclaiming his innocence. Look at what he says in verses 19-20, “But because the Jews objected, I was compelled to appeal to Caesar—though I had no charge to bring against my nation. For this reason, therefore, I have asked to see you and speak with you, since it is because of the hope of Israel that I am wearing this chain.” Paul shows his appeal to Caesar came because the Jews objected to his release and assures them he brought no charge against the nation of Israel because appeals often included counter charges against accusers. Then, he puts the focus again on the hope of Israel, declaring that is the reason for his chains. Paul makes it clear his mission was not anti-Jewish, but part of the hope of God’s covenant people. In verse 21, the Jewish leaders share they haven’t received any report about Paul. And look at verse 22, “But we desire to hear from you what your views are, for with regard to this sect we know that everywhere it is spoken against.” They want to hear what Paul has to say about this sect, referring negatively to Christianity and indicating their awareness of its controversy. This brings us to the pivotal moment of this story. Look at verses 23-24, “When they had appointed a day for him, they came to him at his lodging in greater numbers.

From morning till evening, he expounded to them, testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus both from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets. And some were convinced by what he said, but others disbelieved.” The Jewish leaders come out in droves to hear what Paul has to say, and he testifies all day to the truth about Jesus and the kingdom of God. Note how Luke describes his teaching. The Greek implies a significant debate that combined proclamation with persuasion through the Law of Moses and the Prophets, a common way to sum up the entire Old Testament. Paul sought to persuade them that all of Scripture points to the kingdom of God as it relates to Jesus. This we see bears some fruit, as some were convinced and believe, while others disbelieved. Look at verses 25-28, “And disagreeing among themselves, they departed after Paul had made one statement: ‘The Holy Spirit was right in saying to your fathers through Isaiah the prophet: “Go to this people, and say, ‘You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive.’ For this people’s heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed; lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them.” Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.’” Paul boldly shared the truth of Jesus and his quote of Isaiah 6:9-10 stressed what their rejection meant, as the Spirit warned through Isaiah that God will not heal those who don’t turn in belief. Note how it is when Paul proclaims this truth and the fruit of God’s salvation message among the Gentiles, that they had enough and departed. They were open to debate until it demanded a response. This pattern of bold gospel proclamation, followed by belief and rejection of the Jews, and the inclusion of the Gentiles as part of God’s covenant people, is consistent throughout Acts. So, this pattern continuing right up to the end as Paul boldly proclaimed Christ’s kingdom is fitting. But Luke’s letter doesn’t end there. His final words remind us,

The Gospel Advances Without Hinderance

Luke’s abrupt ending may seem odd as we never see Paul witness before Caesar and released from custody. However, look at verses 30-31 and consider Luke’s focus, “He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.” This is a powerful summary, as we see Paul spend two years living in Rome on his own dime and welcoming all people, Jews and Gentiles, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching boldly about the Lord Jesus Christ without hinderance. Consider what this is revealing. First, the good news continued to be for everyone. Neither Isaiah’s words, nor Paul’s statement of the gospel going to the Gentiles suggests God was turning away from the Jews and only to Gentiles. They merely state Israel’s stubbornness and God’s plan to save Gentiles and bring them into His covenant people. I think this is important to see. This is a confirmation of God’s plan to make one new people in Christ, not failing to keep His promises to Israel. As Paul shows in Romans 11, God has and will save the remnant of Israel because He is true to His promises. Second, the final verse serves as a summary statement of Paul’s time in Rome and this final section of Acts. The book of Acts turns on seven summary statements. Acts 2:46-47, after the initial proclamation of the gospel, “And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.” Acts 6:7, after the gospel spread through Jerusalem, “And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.” Acts 9:31, after the gospel spread through Judea and Samaria, “So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied.” Acts 12:24, after salvation comes to the Gentiles, “the word of God increased and multiplied.” Acts 16:5, after the missionary journeys of Paul and Barnabas, “So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily.” Acts 19:20, after the missionary journeys of Paul, Silas, and Timothy, “So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily.”

And this final statement comes after Paul's witness on trial and in Rome, with the last word of this letter being "without hinderance." Every summary statement reminds us of God's unstoppable word and this final word, along with the unresolved conclusion, calls us to see that word remains unstoppable. The Spirit of God is still moving to spread Christ's kingdom until it reaches the end of the earth. See, while unusual, this is a fitting ending to Acts because it reminds us that God is not done saving a people for Himself from every nation, tongue, and tribe. And we are called to carry on the mission of the church, being courageous and faithful in our witness until Jesus returns. So, let me end with three encouragements from this story for your witness. First,

1) Find Strength in God's Power at Work

I am persuaded one of the things the church today needs the most is to take our eyes off of ourselves and learn to see and rejoice in the Spirit moving. Paul was consistently encouraged from seeing God at work in others. He took courage from how God was already at work in Rome. In Romans 1:8, he writes, "I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world." In Colossians 1:3-4, "We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints." These were churches he had not visited. Paul found strength from seeing God at work even when it had nothing to do with him. I will never forget the first time I preached in Abu Dhabi. I arrived at the hotel where the church worshipped and, because I'm not a social butterfly, I met a couple of people and then sat on the front row as the service started. When I walked up on the stage and turned around, I saw a sea of people from all over the world and my heart was overwhelmed with how God had been working among the nations. I have never been the same. Family, if you want to be strengthened in your witness, learn to set your minds on how the Spirit is moving in the lives of others. Second,

2) Strive for Faithfulness Over Results

Paul was faithful to the Lord in his witness. As one commentator put it, he moved from dawn to dusk, from cover to cover, from heart to heart to teach people about King Jesus from the Scriptures (Tony Merida, *Exalting Jesus in Acts*, p. 394). Yet we are only told "some were convinced." The lack of significant response didn't discourage Paul, as we see him continuing boldly for years following this. Family, I think we lean too heavily on results to our detriment. When we think about how the church is doing, and our witness, we often only focus on number. Then, we feel defeated. But Jesus says in Luke 15:10, "I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents." One person responding brings elation to the myriads of angels in glory. Adoniram Judson was a missionary to Burma. He and his wife didn't see a response of faith until around six years after their arrival on the field. The mission board who sent him reportedly questioned of the lack of fruit and rough outlook of his ministry during those early years. But Adoniram responded, "The prospects are as bright as the promised of God." He understood his call was to be faithful and let God handle the results. Family, strive to be faithful in your witness and let the Spirit do the rest. Finally,

3) Trust that Christ Will Build His Church

I think this was the truth that undergirded Paul's faithfulness. He knew Jesus' words in Matthew 16:18, where He said to Peter, "I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." No matter what tried to prevent Paul's witness, nothing was able to thwart God's purpose. I can hear Paul saying to us, like he said in his final letter to Timothy, "Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel, for which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal. But the word of God is not bound!" Family, the word of God is never bound. The gospel will advance without true hindrance. When John Bunyan was imprisoned for refusing to stop preaching, he wrote and published "The Pilgrim's Progress" that would inspire believers for generations after. When missionaries were expelled from China in the 1950's and state persecution broke out, the church was estimated to be only around one million. It's now estimated to be in the tens of millions. Christ will build his church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

Conclusion:

As the worship team comes for our time of response, let these truths encourage your witness. From cover to cover in Acts, Luke shows God's faithfulness and how no obstacle could hinder the gospel from advancing. Nothing will stop the word of God from spreading to the ends of the earth. As we think on how Christ's work and teaching continued through the Spirit empowered witness of Christ's people, let it call our hearts to dwell on God's faithfulness and go forth in the Holy Spirit's power, with the glories of the gospel to explain, knowing salvation belongs to our God and the earth will be filled with his glory. Let's pray with the early church in Acts 4:29-30, "Sovereign Lord...grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus." Would you pray with me as we prepare to respond?