

On January 10 of this year, I stood on this platform and told you we were starting a new sermon series called *Renewal*. We were going to go through the book of Acts to look at the early church to be renewed in who we were always meant to be and what we are always made to do. And over the last five months, we have done a deep dive into that very thing. It's not only the longest series I've preached, it's longer than any I've ever sat through. But I had a clear leading from the Spirit as we approached 2021 that, given all that was going on in our world, all that was going on in the Church, and our church, that it was wise to take our time and see what God wanted to show us and call us to.

“The Book of Acts is in a real sense a book for renewal. It calls the church back to its roots—to the early church in the upper room in its undivided devotion to prayer, to its missionary fervor, its fellowship and sharing, its mutual trust and unity. It sets a pattern for faithful discipleship, for a witness that walks in the footsteps of the Master, a wholehearted commitment with a willingness to sacrifice and even to suffer. It speaks to us when discouraged, reminding us that all time is in God’s hands, reassuring us of the reality of his Spirit in our lives and witness. It challenges us to open our hearts to the power of the Spirit that we might be faithful witnesses to the word and come to experience anew its triumph in our own time.” -John Polhill

My prayer has been that God would renew us in what he had in mind from the beginning, in our passion for advancing the Gospel, and in our hope in what is possible when we follow Jesus and fulfill our calling as his Body. We spent 21 weeks going through 20 chapters, and this morning we cover the final eight, a verse at a time, so I should have you out of here by Tuesday afternoon! Paul will finish his mission, travel the difficult road to Rome, and show us that, **when all else fails, preach the gospel, because the gospel never fails.** Everything he says, actions, plan is about proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ. He is an example for us. So how do we follow his example when things like whether it be our own agenda, persecution, risk of suffering, and maybe even spiritual lethargy try to get in our way? He'll show us.

Decide it's going to be about Jesus and nothing else. Paul has made his way to Israel and stopped at Philip's house in Caesarea, and will face one last temptation to change course.

[Acts 21:10-14] ¹⁰ While we were staying for many days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. ¹¹ And coming to us, he took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands and said, "Thus says the Holy Spirit, 'This is how the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.' " ¹² When we heard this, we and the people there urged him not to go up to Jerusalem. ¹³ Then Paul answered, "What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." ¹⁴ And since he would not be persuaded, we ceased and said, "Let the will of the Lord be done."

Paul is at Philip's house (one of the seven Hellenist Jews from ch 6) and is visited by a prophet named Agabus who reinforces what the Holy Spirit has already told Paul. He is anticipating imprisonment and affliction, and now he sees how we will be bound. His well-intended and loving friends tell him not to go, but Paul is not to be deterred.

It's a lot easier to quit when we see the road ahead is one of pain and difficulty, others are encouraging you to bail, and when your Kingdom resume already has an abundance of good stuff. Paul could have followed the voices of the crowd, said "I've done enough" or said "I've had enough". Instead, he decides once again it's Jesus and nothing else, come what may.

On this Memorial Day weekend, I'm reminded of video I've seen of those young men on D-Day, sitting in those boats that would land on Omaha Beach, knowing those German gunners were waiting for them. They could have bailed, but they made a decision to follow the mission and to do their part in overcoming darkness. Paul will see his mission through until the end and bring the message of light all the way to Rome.

The world is in desperate need of a Church that decides it is about Jesus and nothing else. And like the world responded 2,000 years ago, it will respond the same way today. What is holding you back from making that decision? Fear, FOMO, the voices of the crowd? Remember Jesus said we have to trade in our idea of our lives in order to get the life God has for us, but also remember he said that we are to take up our cross daily. Each day is a new opportunity to pick up our cross and say "I have decided today is about Jesus and nothing else." When we do that, our lives will be a testimony to the gospel, no matter what we may encounter.

And no matter what we experience, we can **take courage in the presence and power of Jesus**. After a few days, Paul makes his way to Jerusalem and is confronted by Jews and arrested by Roman soldiers at the temple. Paul addresses the crowd by giving his testimony and speaking of Gentile inclusion in the Gospel. They call for his death. He's taken by the guards who are prepared to flog him until they find out he's a Roman citizen, and then he addresses the tribune and Sanhedrin, proclaiming the hope of the resurrection, and that ends with them wanting to tear him to pieces. I'd be out! But God's goodness shows up.

[Acts 23:11] ¹¹ The following night the Lord stood by him and said, "Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome."

In the midst of this violent torment, Jesus reassures Paul he is with him and will see him through until the end. Luke tells us the Lord stood by him. I believe that's more than proximity. It means he had Paul's back and he will get Paul where he wants him to go. I can only imagine the way Paul relayed this story to Luke! Don't you get a little braver if you have someone standing by your side? My middle brother was 6'6", 300 lbs. He got all the size. I got all the athleticisms. But when he was next to me, I stood a little taller, walked with more confidence and courage It's the same with Jesus.

I never get tired reminding us that, if you are a follower of Jesus, you are never alone. We are the temple of his Spirit, he has told us he'll be with us to the end of the age, and, in eternity, God will make his dwelling among us. It doesn't mean nothing bad will happen to us in this life. Jesus told us to expect suffering. But the one who is with you has seen it all, experienced it all, and is more powerful than anything you might face. He will comfort and sustain you with his presence and overcome whatever is in the way to get you where he wants you to go.

And as you go, **expect the unexpected.** The Jews conspire to have Paul killed, but the Roman official gets word of it and sends Paul away to Caesarea to be under the care and judgment of the pagan, Roman governor Felix. The council officials follow and accuse, and Paul defends himself by showing how the Old Testament pointed to the gospel. Felix delays making a judgement, but he's about to be confronted with the truth of the gospel himself.

Acts 24:34-25] ²⁴ After some days Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish, and he sent for Paul and heard him speak about faith in Christ Jesus. ²⁵ And as he reasoned about righteousness and self-control and the coming judgment, Felix was alarmed and said, "Go away for the present. When I get an opportunity, I will summon you."

Felix is not presented in a flattering way. He's a schemer who he broke up a marriage in order to marry his wife, Drusilla. But it appears he wants to know more of Paul's beliefs. Paul preaches the gospel and Felix is not prepared for how it hits him. I see it going like this: "You are saved by God's grace through faith in Jesus. You see, God is righteous and just and judge and one day we're all going to stand before him to give an account of our lives. And we must be presented as righteous ourselves or stand condemned. Now, if through self-control you are able to keep all of God's commands, you'll be judged righteous." This is where Felix starts getting nervous. "So, Felix, you can either stand before God on your own merit or, you can place your faith in Jesus, who is righteous and imputes his righteousness on us so that you can stand before God in his righteousness." It hits home with Felix. We're told he's alarmed. Terrified is probably a better translation. He's so shaken he sends Paul away. We don't know if Felix ever placed his faith in the Lord. It will be interesting to see. But, in the moment the gospel is presented, a pagan, political animal who probably had disdain for the Jews, is cut to the core.

You see, we never know who is going to respond. There's a person in our church who lived far from God for years, had no interest, wicked, sinful, and beyond hope. But one day, God's grace got a hold of that person, drew them to himself, and changed their life forever. You know who that was? You. Me. Every one of us who are believers. Now, you might have trusted in Jesus at age six and are thinking "I don't know if I was ever that bad." But here's the truth. Scripture says we didn't start our lives close to God and stepped away an inch at a time. No, we were born stained by sin, condemned, and far apart from God. There was a great chasm between us and God that we didn't see, and we didn't care about. Our back was turned to him. But God's grace, his kindness, as Kim said, caused us to turn to him, to recognize the chasm sin had created between us, and to understand there's was nothing we could do to cross that gap, but Jesus could, and did. God extended his grace, showed you your need for salvation, stirred your heart to trust in Christ, and brought you from death to life. We don't need an example of some exaggerated heathen who hated God because every one of us was that heathen and it was only by God's grace that we are saved. **If God can save you, God can save anybody. There is no one beyond his reach, so there is no one who shouldn't hear the gospel.**

And if you struggle with that, **remember always what it's all about.** Felix delays two years until he is replaced by Festus. The Jewish leaders immediately engage him and ask for Paul to be turned over, but Paul appeals to Caesar, a right given to all Roman citizens, to have his case heard in Rome. He forces Festus's hand. The problem is that Festus can't find that Paul did anything wrong and didn't want to send him to Rome with no charges against him. So he calls

King Agrippa and his wife, Bernice, to a private audience with Paul in the hopes they could help him come up with some charges. Paul preaches the gospel and his own conversion story, and how the Old Testament Prophets pointed to Jesus.

[Acts 26:27-29] ²⁷ King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe.”

²⁸ And Agrippa said to Paul, “In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?”

²⁹ And Paul said, “Whether short or long, I would to God that not only you but also all who hear me this day might become such as I am—except for these chains.”

Paul’s burning desire, his God-given purpose, is to make much of God and help bring as many as possible to saving faith in Jesus. The Kingdom is built one believer at a time, and Paul’s greatest desire is for everyone he meets to come to know Jesus.

Do you live our life with a burden for unbelievers? Do we believe what Scripture says happens to those who die without knowing Jesus? I will at times look up and realize I have no unbelievers in my life. What about you? Do we believe they sit under condemnation, facing an eternity without God as penalty for their sin, dead spiritually but existing eternally? Do we believe hell is real and does it eat us up knowing that’s the eternal destination for many in our midst? I know that’s not politically correct, not attractional, but it is true. But the gospel is proof that’s not what God wants, so he sent his one and only Son to die on a cross and rise three days later so that whoever believes in him will not perish, not face that horrific eternity, but will instead be saved to eternal life with God. We’re going to spend June and July talking about that eternity, talking about Heaven. We should want everyone there with us, and the way that happens is when they hear the gospel and, by God’s grace, respond in faith. You were made to make much of God and point others to him. Our lives are to be a proclamation of the gospel in every way so that God can use us to bring others to himself. What a glorious calling. What a glorious privilege.

And that’s what Paul did until the very end. He is sent to Rome, experiences a shipwreck, but eventually makes it. He has to wait another two years for his case to be heard, but Luke ends the book of Acts with this testimony:

[Acts 28:30-31] ³⁰ He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, ³¹ proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.

Oh that the last thing ever written about any of us would be that we were proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus with all boldness and without hindrance. Many think this is an odd way to end the story. Some think part of it was lost. Others think something happened to Luke. But regardless of reality, it makes us lean in and ask, “And then...?” Well, the “And then...?” is you and me. The “And then...?” is Fellowship Dallas, at Park Lane and Central Expressway, in the year of our Lord 2021, carrying out the same mission Jesus gave back in Acts 1:8, that we would receive his Spirit, and through the power of the Spirit, would be his witnesses here and abroad.

A lot has changed in 2,000 years. Who we are as the Church and what mission we've been called to has not. And, most importantly, the God we worship, who makes it all happen, hasn't either. This book is a testimony to our unstoppable God and the renewing power of the gospel. Let us be all about him, all about one another, and all about making him known. He's leading the way, and he can't be stopped.