

The Kingdom of God and the Lord Jesus

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[0:00] We're in Acts chapter 28. We're finishing the book of Acts today. So please turn with me to Acts chapter 28, verses 17 to 31.

Let me pray for the reading and preaching of God's word. Heavenly Father, we humble ourselves before you as you address us from your holy scriptures.

Again, every time we go through a book beginning to the end, we are surprised again and again by how timelessly relevant and how powerful your word is.

And we ask today that you would speak to us. That you would remind us of our identity as ambassadors of Christ.

And fill us with your Holy Spirit. Embolden us to bear witness to Jesus. In his precious name we pray.

[1:28] Amen. Acts chapter 28, verses 17 to 31. After three days, he called together the local leaders of the Jews.

And when they had gathered, he said to them, Brothers, though I had done nothing against our people or the customs of our fathers, yet I was delivered as a prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans.

When they had examined me, they wished to set me at liberty because there was no reason for the death penalty in my case. 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. And they said to him, We have received no letters from Judea about you, and none of the brothers coming here has reported or spoken any evil about you. 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. When they had appointed a day for him, they came to him at his lodging in greater numbers.

[2:55] 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. 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. From this people's heart has grown dull. 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. 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.

[4:07] This is God's holy and authoritative word. As I mentioned, we are at the end of the book of Acts and you can see that. And apart from Paul's pastoral epistles, that's 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, this is the last we hear of Apostle Paul.

And we find him here at the very end of, near the very end of his life, during his imprisonment, still preaching the gospel. Even though he doesn't know how many people, if any, will respond to his sharing of the gospel, he says at the end that he was proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.

That's how the book of Acts concludes. And this is the truth that Luke wants to impress upon us at the end of the book, that we, as believers, like Paul, are all ambassadors who proclaim the kingdom of God.

It's a calling we have received from our Lord, our Master Jesus. So we're going to talk about how, talk about the identity of the messenger, Paul. We're going to talk about the recipients of the message.

And then we will finally talk about the content of the message itself, the messengers, recipients, and the message. In verse 16, we were told that after arriving in Rome, Paul was allowed to stay by himself with the soldier who guarded him.

[5:34] In other words, a soldier was posted to guard Paul. And usually, customarily at this time, the soldier would literally be chained to the prisoner. And so they would always have to travel together.

That would prevent the prisoner from running away. But apart from that one soldier that was guarding Paul, he had relative freedom. He was able to live in his own private residence.

He was allowed to have visitors. And so it says then, because of that, he invites some of the Jews, the local leaders of the Jews in verse 17, to come and visit him so he can have a conversation with them, talk to them.

And whenever Paul entered a new town, we've seen throughout the book of Acts, it was his habit to go first to the synagogues to speak to the Jews, to preach to the Jews.

And since he can't do that as a prisoner, he invites them to come to him. And then he explains the circumstances of his imprisonment in verses 17 to 20. Brothers, though I had done nothing against our people or the customs of our fathers, yet I was delivered as a prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans.

[6:42] When they had examined me, they wished to set me at liberty because there was no reason for the death penalty in my case. 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. So Paul is once again defending himself and insisting on his innocence.

Even though he's in prison and it looks different, he's telling the Jewish leaders that he has done nothing against our people. We saw earlier in chapter 22 that the Jews falsely accused Paul of being against the Jewish people and the Jewish law.

Paul was never against the Jewish people. In fact, here Paul addresses the Jewish leaders as brothers. He calls their Jewish ancestors our fathers. And then he refers to the nation of Israel as my nation, reminding them that I have not abandoned my people.

However, while Paul did teach that salvation was from the Jews because our Savior, the Messiah Jesus, is a Jewish man, he also taught that salvation is for all nations, even for the Gentiles, all those who repent and believe in Jesus.

[8:02] And that's why in verse 28 later, Paul says, let it be known to you that the salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles. And this challenge to the uniqueness of the Jews is what led some to falsely accuse Paul of being against the Jewish people.

And in addition to that, Paul also defends himself by saying he had done nothing against the customs of our fathers. As long as the Jews understood that it's not the keeping of the Mosaic law in their own strength and keeping of the Jewish customs that saved them, but rather Jesus who saved them through his life, death, and resurrection, Paul was fine with the Jews observing their Jewish customs.

But because Paul insisted that we can never be saved by our own righteousness by observing the Jewish law, because all of us have fallen short, some people falsely accused Paul of being against the customs of the fathers.

And despite his innocence and despite the judgment of the Romans that he was innocent, the Jews objected. And this is why Paul was compelled to appeal to Caesar.

And he is here in Rome, imprisoned. And Paul says, though he had no charge to bring against my nation. So twice in this passage, Paul insists that he had nothing against the Jews.

[9:29] He says, I never spoke against the Jewish people or the law or the customs of the Jewish people. I have no charge to bring against my nation. But twice he mentions that the Jews themselves were against Paul.

He says that they spoke against him. The word objected is literally they spoke against him in verse 19. And in verse 22, the Jewish leaders admit concerning Christianity that everywhere it is spoken against.

So Paul is drawing a contrast here. It's not Paul who is against the Jews. It's the Jews who are against Paul and against Christ.

As we bear witness to Jesus, as we proclaim God's word, we will be spoken against. We will be mischaracterized as being against certain groups of people.

When we say that Jesus is the Son of God and that he is the only way to God the Father, followers of others, adherents of other religions will charge us of being against them.

[10:40] When we teach biblical ethics on sex and gender, those who disagree with us will accuse us of being against them, of trying to oppress them.

But we must remind them that we are not against them. We are for Jesus. And because of that, we are ultimately for their good.

What does Paul say in verse 20? It is because of the hope of Israel that I am wearing this chain.

Because of the hope of the resurrection that Jesus fulfilled when he was raised from the dead.

I am not in prison, Paul is saying, for being against Israel. No, I am in chains because of the hope of Israel. If we follow Christ faithfully, people will be against us, but we must not be against them.

We cannot give in to the same tribalistic us versus them attitude. Because our battle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

[11:58] So instead we tell them, we are for you. We are for the fulfillment of God's promises and salvation in your life. We are for God's holiness and human flourishing.

Jesus did not come to steal and kill and destroy. That's what the devil does. He came that you may have life and have it abundantly. And after Paul's introduction and defense of himself to the local leaders of the Jews, they appoint a day for him to share his theological views.

And on that day, it says, they came to him at his lodging in greater numbers. And Paul teaches them from the scriptures, from morning till evening, trying to convince them about Jesus, both from the law of Moses and from the prophets.

So here, because Paul's evangelizing fellow Jews who had a shared faith in the Old Testament scriptures, he uses that as the common ground to prove that Jesus is the prophesied Messiah, the promised king, who lived and died and was raised from the dead.

And that all need to trust in him in order to be saved from their sins. And Luke, in particular, Paul uses three words in verse 23 that helpfully summarized our evangelistic task, what we're supposed to do when we're sharing the gospel with other people.

[13:17] He says, from morning till evening, he expounded to them, testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus. So the first word is expound.

That's the main verb. We have to explain who Jesus is and what Jesus did. We can't share the gospel without explaining that to people.

What is the significance of Jesus' life, his death and resurrection? But as we do this, we're not merely conveying information because this expounding also entails testifying and convincing.

It includes testimony and persuasion. First, the word testify refers to a solemn testimony of a witness in a trial. Its original meaning was to bear witness under oath.

So when you're solemnly exhorting someone, warning someone, that's when you are testifying to something. When you testify in court, what you say can determine whether a person will go to jail or not, whether a person will live or die.

[14:29] Sharing the gospel in a similar way is of utmost weight. It's not small talk about the weather outside or sports or your TV show.

When you're exhorting someone, when you're testifying to the gospel to Jesus, we're conveying that sense of gravity and consequence of the gospel that a person's eternal fate hangs in the balance.

Second, the word convince is different from merely conversing. When we share the gospel with people, we're not just exchanging views or opinions.

We're changing their views and opinions. We're trying to persuade them, win them over to our point of view.

So when we share the gospel, there should be an invitation to believe. I have a childhood friend from when I was growing up in elementary school days in South Korea.

[15:41] I had invited him to church when we were children many times. He'd gone to church with me many times. He'd heard the gospel many times. And after I moved to the United States when I was 12, several years later, he actually came also.

He wasn't following me. He just had other stuff to do and ended up in the same area because he knew I was there. And I got to share the gospel. He came to church with me many times. But even though we had been doing this for many years, he just never seemed to cross the threshold.

And then one day, I came home and he was hanging out with my family because he was close to my family too.

And he was just beaming with joy. He's one of those guys that has a face that just looks sad by default. Like he has one of those drooping eyes. But I could tell that day he was really happy the whole time.

And he comes up to me and he tells me, Sean, I'm a Christian now. What? You are?

[16:52] What happened? Oh, your mom just asked me if I wanted to become a Christian. And I said yes. And we pray together and I'm going to get baptized.

I was like, what? She just asked you? And it's like, you never asked me. You never asked me. That's stuck with me all these years.

He had often heard the gospel, but he was never confronted with the need to make a decision. He was never given an invitation to make a commitment to Jesus.

When we expound the gospel, we are testifying and convincing. We're not merely exchanging views. We're inviting them to change their views and to accept Jesus as their own.

And as we do this, we need to recognize that there will be mixed responses. Verses 24 to 25 say this, and some were convinced by what Paul said, but others disbelieved.

[18:12] And disagreeing among themselves, they departed after Paul and made one statement. So some Jews are believing, but many others are not believing. And Paul makes sense of the Jews' rejection of the gospel by quoting Isaiah 6, 9 to 11 in verses 26 to 27.

In the original context of Isaiah, Isaiah is receiving his prophetic commission from the Lord. When the Lord says, whom shall I send? Who will go for us? Isaiah responds, here I am, send me.

And God commands him to go and say to Israel, this is from Isaiah, not from Acts, keep on hearing, but do not understand. Keep on seeing, but do not perceive.

Make the heart of this people dull and their ears heavy and blind their eyes, lest they see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their hearts and turn and be healed.

In Isaiah, the phrases are imperatives. Isaiah is commanded to make the heart of this people dull and their ears heavy and blind their eyes, lest they repent.

[19:22] So there, what is emphasized in the original context of Isaiah is God's sovereignty and salvation. In that particular situation, God had decreed that Israel would stubbornly refuse to repent so that he might visit them with judgment and demonstrate his righteousness.

Similarly, in Matthew 13, 10 to 17, when Jesus' disciples ask him, why do you speak to people in parables? Jesus answers by saying, to you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given.

And then he cites this exact same passage from Isaiah and then he explains, this is why I speak to them in parables, parables, because seeing they do not see and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.

In other words, to some people, the secrets of the kingdom have not been given and speaking in parables fulfills Isaiah's prophecy that they will hear but not understand. They will see but not perceive.

But note the way that Paul applies Isaiah 6 in this passage is a little different. It's less prescriptive and it's more descriptive.

[20:38] Instead of saying, make the people's heart grow dull, Paul follows the Greek translation of Isaiah which says, this people's heart has grown dull.

Instead of saying, make their ears heavy and blind their eyes, Paul says, with their ears they can barely hear and their eyes they have closed. So in Isaiah's original context and in Jesus' use of it, the emphasis is on divine sovereignty.

unless God acts to save, no one can hear and understand and be saved. But here in the context of Acts, the emphasis is on human responsibility.

Paul laments that the Jews are hard of hearing, that they are themselves closing their own eyes. They're refusing to believe the good news of Jesus. We can account for this difference in emphases by looking at who the intended audience is.

In Isaiah, God is speaking to his prophet, Isaiah. In the Gospels, Jesus is speaking to his apostles. He's explaining to them God's sovereign role in salvation and reassuring them that they need not be disillusioned when people reject them and reject the Gospel because even that is ultimately fulfilling God's sovereign purposes.

[22:00] But here in Acts, Paul is citing Isaiah to unbelieving Jews. So he puts the onus on them and emphasizes their responsibility because as paradoxical as it may seem to us, both divine sovereignty and human responsibility are biblical realities.

People have a real responsibility to respond to the preaching of the Gospel. It's not enough that you're hearing. You have to respond.

You have to perceive. You have to understand. You have to believe. You have to repent of your sins and follow Jesus. We must not stop our ears or close our eyes.

There must be a response. And there's a contrast between what the Jews say to Paul in verse 22 and what Paul says to the Jews in verses 26-27.

In verse 22, the Jews say to Paul, we desire to hear from you what your views are. But in verse 26, Paul says, you will indeed hear but never understand.

[23:09] And in verse 27, in their ears, they can barely hear. Some of these Jews do not have the ears to hear. They are hearing but not understanding.

And it is this rejection of the Gospel by the Jews that makes Paul turn toward the Gentiles. Paul says in verse 28, therefore let it be known to you that the salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles.

They will listen. This doesn't mean that Paul is turning away from his fellow Jews once and for all. This doesn't mean that God has rejected Jews forever.

This is now the third time in the book of Acts that Paul mentions turning away from the Jews toward the Gentiles. But after each time, he never stops preaching to the Jews.

But the fact that he keeps saying this, Luke is mentioning this three times, it shows us that he is highlighting something here for us. In chapter 13, when Paul, when the Jews reject the Gospel in Pisidian Antioch, Paul told them, I'm turning to the Gentiles.

[24:15] Chapter 18, verse 6, when the Corinthian Jews rejected Jesus and opposed Paul, he said, I'm from now on I will go to the Gentiles. So what is going on here? Paul explains this in Romans 11.

He says, through the Jews' trespass, salvation has come to the Gentiles, so to make Israel jealous. And he says, later in that same chapter, Romans 11, a partial hardening has come upon Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.

And in this way, all Israel will be saved. In other words, the rejection of Jesus by the Jews is what prompts the inclusion of the Gentiles.

And eventually, the Jews will be jealous of the Gentiles' salvation, and they themselves will repent and believe in Jesus, leading to all Israel, meaning the new people of God that includes both Jews and Gentiles, being saved.

God chose the Jews so that from them our Savior might come to bring salvation to all nations, and God brings all nations to the salvation so that he might in turn turn his people, the Jews, back to him.

[25:29] So there's a wonderful reciprocity there. This is why in verse 30, Luke summarizes, he lived there two whole years at his own expense and welcomed all who came to him.

All means Jews and Gentiles, Romans and barbarians, men and women, young and old, slaves and free, rich and poor, pretty and ugly, strong and weak, influential and marginalized, criminals and victims, history makers, and history's forgettables.

If they repent of their sins, if they turn toward Jesus, all can come. And Paul welcomes all to come to him because that's what his Lord Jesus does.

Jesus said in John 6, 37, all that the Father gives me will come to me and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. Maybe you're weighed down by guilt this morning.

Maybe you're wrestling with a deep sense of shame. you might not feel worthy to come to Jesus and the truth is no one is. But if the master himself invites us in, who is the servant that can turn us away?

[27:00] Amen. With this kind of promise, whoever comes to me I will never cast out.

How can we not eagerly come to Jesus receive forgiveness and be reconciled to him? There's a Tennessee bluegrass band called Blue Highway.

Anybody listen to them? No? It's okay. They have a song entitled Ground is Level at the Foot of the Cross. And it goes this way, You can judge your brother by his fortune size, but we're all the same in the good Lord's eyes.

You can judge your sister by the deeds she's done, but we're judged in heaven by the carpenter's son. If you measure the gain, better count the cost, because the ground is level at the foot of the cross.

Why gain the world if your soul's been lost? Because the ground is level at the foot of the cross. We've talked about the messenger, we've talked about the recipients, all who come, and let's talk about the message.

[28:16] What exactly is Paul preaching? Verse 31 tells us clearly that Paul was proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.

This is amazing. Remember that not long after Paul arrived in Jerusalem in chapter 21, he was arrested, and then he was transferred to Caesarea. In Acts 24, 27 told us that two years had elapsed with Paul in prison there.

And after a long and dangerous journey through the sea, Paul finally arrives in Rome in Acts 28, and here we learn in verse 30 that Paul was under house arrest in Rome for two whole years.

So that's about five years. Five years that Paul's under Roman custody as a prisoner. And we might expect that this prolonged imprisonment, and after that, Paul would lack boldness or be hindered from preaching the gospel.

But it says that Paul was proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance. It's during his imprisonment in Rome that Paul wrote four of his 13 letters in the New Testament.

[29:29] Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon. And in his closing remarks in Philippians 4, verse 22, Paul writes, all the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household.

Some of those people who came to faith in Jesus through Paul's ministry during his imprisonment in Rome included members of Caesar's household. Paul's chains did not hinder him from proclaiming the gospel.

what's hindering us. As Paul writes in 2 Timothy 2, 8 to 9, 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.

We can be bound with chains, but the word of God cannot be bound. Our platforms might be censored, but the word of God can never be bound.

Even while in prison, Paul did not forget that he is an ambassador for the kingdom of God. And we too have to remember that we are ambassadors who proclaim the kingdom of God. Whether we have a job or not, whether we are still a student or not, whether we are busy or not, whether we're sick or healthy, we are all as Christians ambassadors of the kingdom of God.

[31:10] There's some turbulent things going on in international affairs. Imagine that our Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, our country's most senior diplomat, imagine that he travels to meet with the Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov, but then he forgets what he's there for, namely to stop a war from happening, and then he starts touring St. Basil's Cathedral in Moscow, and he starts admiring the art in the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, and he doesn't do any of his job.

That would be unthinkable, because he's an ambassador. He's not there on his own authority to do whatever he wants to do. He's been sent there by someone else to do his bidding and to send his message.

And that's who we are. We are ambassadors of the kingdom of God. We are not tourists here on earth. We are ambassadors who have been sent out with a mission.

We represent our King Jesus, and we are here to relay his message to the world. This sinful world is in rebellion against God. They have sought to usurp God's throne, but God has appointed his heir, Jesus, the Son of God, as the Messianic King.

And Jesus, instead of crushing the rebels with brute force, he gave his life on the cross to pay the penalty for their treason. And Jesus has been raised from the dead to reconcile these sinners to himself.

[32:54] And this is the King's message. If you renounce your other allegiances, if you renounce yourself, your own rebellion against me, and you pledge allegiance to King Jesus, Jesus, if you repent, turn from your sins, and turn toward Jesus, and submit to his rule and authority, then you can be reconciled again to God.

Then you can be citizens of the kingdom of God. And as the citizens of the kingdom, we are ambassadors sent out to proclaim that same news.

We read this from 2 Corinthians 5, 18-21 in our assurance of pardon today. We are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us.

We implore people to be reconciled to God on Christ's behalf. This ending of the book of Acts has puzzled people, many people, over the years because it strikes a lot of people as anticlimactic.

You know, they wonder, hey, why didn't the book end with Paul's long-awaited release from prison and ongoing missionary work? There are extra-biblical Christian literature like the first letter of Clement from 1st century A.D., as well as the moratorium canon from the 7th century A.D.

[34:22] that note that Paul was in fact released from his imprisonment in Rome and that he continued to travel to the extremities of the West and to bear witness as far as Spain.

Why doesn't Luke tell us about that? Some people wonder why the book doesn't follow Paul's journey even further than that to conclude it with the heroic tale of Paul's martyrdom in Rome after his second imprisonment in Rome.

We know from verse 30 that Luke was aware that Paul's imprisonment in Rome lasted two whole years so it came to an end. So he knows that it came to an end but Luke has chosen not to tell us what happens afterward.

Instead he decided to leave us with Paul proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance. I think that's the most appropriate ending because it concludes with the focus not on Paul but on the message of Jesus that Paul proclaimed.

The most pertinent question for Luke is not what happened to Paul? The most pertinent question is what happened to the gospel?

[35:52] And what happened to the gospel is this the gospel continued to go forward in 60 years most of us will no longer be alive and we will be mostly forgotten but the important question is will the gospel be remembered where we were?

will the gospel continue in the lives of those around us? Will the name of Jesus continue to be exalted when our name has faded?

That's what matters so let's live for that Heavenly Father Lord that's what we want our life to be about.

We want it to be about the Lord Jesus Christ. We want to be people who say I've resolved to know nothing but Christ crucified.

We want to be people who say woe is me if I do not preach the gospel. We want to be people who go out of this world proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ with our dying breath.

[37:29] For your glory's sake. For your glory's sake. Lord, use us as you wish.

Change us. In Jesus' name we pray.

Amen. Amen. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen. In Jesus' name we pray.

Amen. In Jesus' name we pray. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen.