

# Acts

*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. (Acts 1:8 ESV)*

*And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts 2:42 ESV)*

## **Paul In Rome**

**Acts 28:11-31**

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Good morning, Redeemer! It is good to be with you all this morning! If you have a Bible with you, would you please open it now to Acts 28:17. Here we are at the very end of the book of Acts. We have spent the last two sermons in this series walking through how Luke sets the stage for this moment here. We have seen how God used Paul and his companion's miraculous survival through the stormy seas, Paul surviving a bite from a viper, and Paul's healing of the people on Malta in order to establish Paul as God's authoritative spokesperson. Luke has been laying the groundwork for this final interaction between Paul and the Jewish leaders.

The narrative picks up where we left of last week. In verses 11-16 Luke recounts how they stayed in Malta for three months, and the rest of their journey to Rome is summarized. The group travels to Rome and, as they do so, are greeted along the way by brothers and sisters in Christ. These Christians encourage Paul and his companions on his journey. Eventually Paul makes his way to Rome where he is placed under house arrest but is allowed to live by himself as a trusted prisoner.

This is where we are going to pick up the passage now in Acts 28:17.

Hear now the Word of the Lord.

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. <sup>18</sup> When they had examined me, they wished to set me at liberty, because there was no reason for the death penalty in my case. <sup>19</sup> But because the Jews objected, I

was compelled to appeal to Caesar—though I had no charge to bring against my nation. <sup>20</sup> 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.” <sup>21</sup> 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. <sup>22</sup> 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.” <sup>23</sup> 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. <sup>24</sup> And some were convinced by what he said, but others disbelieved. <sup>25</sup> 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: <sup>26</sup> “Go to this people, and say, “You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive.” <sup>27</sup> 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.’ <sup>28</sup> Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.” <sup>30</sup> He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, <sup>31</sup> proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance. (Acts 28:17-31 ESV)

This the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

There is a lot going on in this passage. There are a lot of things we could unpack and learn from in this passage. It's fascinating that the Jewish leaders claim to have no knowledge that Paul was coming to Rome or have heard no evil word about Paul. It's fascinating that they claim to have little to no knowledge of Christianity when Paul the Church in Rome had already been established and Paul had already written his letter to the Roman Church. There is lots we could say about this.

And there is lots we could say about why Luke ends the book of Acts this way. Why he doesn't give us more detail on the Apostle Paul's life, why he doesn't tell us what happened after the two

years Paul lived here in Rome. Church history tells us that Paul was released and continued preaching the word for a season before his death as Eusebius writes:

“After defending himself the Apostle was again sent on the ministry of preaching and coming a second time to the same city suffered martyrdom under Nero.”<sup>1</sup>

So, its interesting that Luke doesn't record any of that part of Paul's life. There are a number of reasons why Luke ends Acts this way. Church history suggest that one reason is that Luke felt a sense of urgency in getting this book written and delivered to the Church. He wanted the Church to see the progress of the gospel movement from Jerusalem to Judea, to Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. He wanted them to see this movement and participate in it.

Another related reason is that Luke had made his point. The purpose of his writings had been accomplished. Between the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts he has traced the progress of the Christian faith from its inception in Jesus Christ as the promised Messiah through to the foundation of the Church and its role to make disciples of all nations. Remember that Luke has told us about Paul's miraculous survival through the Shipwreck and his time on Malta in order to set the stage for this interaction here with the Jewish Leaders. It is clear that Luke sees this moment as climactic and final. He has endeavoured to lay out the trajectory of the Church's growth and mission to the world and, having done so, he lays down his pen. There is a lot that we could unpack here as well.

But this morning we are going to focus in on Paul's message. I want you to notice something here about what Paul was saying to the Jewish leaders in Rome. Notice in verse 20 that Paul once again states that:

“it is because of the hope of Israel that I am wearing this chain.”(Acts 28:20b ESV)

It is the because of the hope of Israel. Notice also in verse 23 that:

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<sup>1</sup> Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History 2.22.1-7

“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.” (Acts 28:23 ESV)

Paul is expounding to these Jewish leaders, testifying the kingdom of God, trying to convince them about Jesus; Paul is preaching the gospel. Last week we were reminded that throughout the book of Acts miracles are always shown to be in service to the Word. So, the miracles we have been looking at over the last couple of weeks have been in service to this Word here in Acts 28. They are in service to the preaching of the gospel.

So as Luke ends his book here with the preaching of the gospel, as Paul preaches the gospel to the Jewish leaders, I want to ask the question:

## **What Does Paul’s Message Reveal About The Gospel?**

There are three things about the gospel that Paul’s message to the Jewish leaders highlights for us to see. The first is:

### **1. The Heart of the Gospel**

We see this in verse 23 which we read a few moments ago.

Now the phrase “The Law of Moses and the Prophets” is often used in the Bible to refer to the entirety of the Old Testament. Essentially, what Luke is saying here is that Paul, as he usually does, expounded upon the entire Old Testament to demonstrate that Jesus is the promised messiah.

Paul taught these Jewish leaders that Jesus is the hope of Israel.

And that is the heart of the gospel message. Jesus is the hope of Israel. He is the promised Messiah. He is the suffering servant, the prophet like Moses, the king like David, he is the one who will defeat Israel’s enemies, who will deliver them and rule over them forever.

Jesus is the fulfillment of EVERY Old Testament promise.

We have seen this idea time and time again throughout the book of Acts and it is perfectly fitting that here in the very end of the book of Acts it is repeated once more.

Jesus is the fulfillment of EVERY Old Testament promise. There can be no doubt that he is the messiah. He is savior and he is Lord. And he is the heart of the Gospel. The book of Acts has made that abundantly clear.

Listen, I know we have covered this ground a lot, I know we have talked about it repeatedly throughout the book of Acts, but there is a reason Luke has been driving this point home over and over again. BECAUSE IT IS THE MOST IMPORTANT TRUTH THERE IS.

There is nothing more significant than this fact: It is ALL ABOUT JESUS.

HE is the author of our faith. He is the perfecter of our Faith. He is the lion of Judah. He is the lamb who takes away the sins of the World. His name is the name at which every knee will bow in heaven and on Earth and under the Earth. To him is due all glory, all majesty, all honour, all dominion now and forever. It is ALL about him. Jesus is the gospel.

Jesus must be the center of your worldview.

Not only that, but he must also be the center of your world.

Jesus must be the center of your WORLDVIEW AND he must be the center of your WORLD.

Are you seeing that this morning?

Are you seeing that he needs to be the center of our WORLDVIEW and the lens through which all scripture is interpreted, the lens through which we understand all of human history. Are you seeing that Jesus is the heart of the gospel, that he is the focus of every word of scripture, he is the source of our salvation, and the object of our desire?

I am reminded of this great quote from John Piper in *God Is the Gospel* where he writes:

If you could have heaven, with no sickness, and with all the friends you ever had on earth, and all the food you ever liked, and all the leisure activities you ever enjoyed, and all the natural beauties you ever saw, all the physical pleasures you ever tasted, and no human conflict or any natural disasters, could you be satisfied with heaven, if Christ were not there?<sup>2</sup>

Listen friends, It is all about him. It is all about who he is and what he has done for us through his life, death, and resurrection. Luke is reminding us about this time and time again so that we might have it drilled into our minds, so that we might not forget, so that we might not be dazzled and distracted by the things of this world, so that we might have our eyes fixed firmly on Jesus, so that he might receive all the honour and glory that is due his mighty name.

Jesus is the heart of the gospel. He is the hope of Israel. He is the light of the world.

That is the first thing we see in Paul's message. The second is:

## **2. The Mystery of the Gospel**

Often when we hear the word mystery, we think of a conundrum that needs to be solved. We think of Agatha Christie or Sherlock Holmes. But the word mystery in the Bible has a different meaning. I love the way Paul Carter explained this in a sermon he did on Ephesians 1 where he said:

“In the Bible a “mystery” is an open secret that can only be understood by supernatural revelation.<sup>3</sup>”

A mystery is an open secret that can only be understood by supernatural revelation. That is what is going on here in Paul's interaction with the Jews. We see in verse 24 that some of the Jewish leaders were convinced by Paul and others weren't. This leads to Paul quoting from Isaiah 6:9-10 where he says:

“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.”

<sup>27</sup> For this people's heart has grown dull,

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<sup>2</sup> John Piper, *God Is the Gospel: Meditations on God's Love as the Gift of Himself* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005), p. 15.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Carter Semon on Ephesians 1:9-10

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.” (Acts 28:26-27 ESV)

This is what we mean when we say the Gospel is an “open secret”. Paul is saying in this quote that God had hardened the hearts of the Israelites, he had closed their eyes, and blocked up their ears. They see but they do not perceive, they hear but they do not understand. God hardened the hearts of the Jews SO THAT they would not be able to see, understand, and accept the gospel message.

That is the mystery. That is the open secret. The gospel message can be heard by all, but it can only be received by those whom God has chosen. It is like a dog whistle. It only summons those who are able to hear it properly.

This is the consistent teaching of Scripture. This is not a new idea or doctrine that Paul is establishing. He is quoting from the prophet Isaiah to make this point. And he establishes this point more thoroughly in his letter to the Romans. In Romans chapters 9 through 11 Paul lays out this mystery. In chapters 9 and 10 he demonstrates the sovereignty of God over salvation. In Romans 9:14-18 we read:

<sup>14</sup> What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! <sup>15</sup> For he says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.” <sup>16</sup> So then it depends not on human will or exertion,<sup>[b]</sup> but on God, who has mercy. <sup>17</sup> For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, “For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.” <sup>18</sup> So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills. (Romans 9:14-18 ESV)

Paul uses Pharaoh as an example. He lifted Pharaoh up; HE hardened Pharaoh’s heart against Moses in order that God’s glory would be put on full display. God hardened Pharaoh’s heart to accomplish his good purposes.

That is what we are talking about. That is the mystery of God's providence. That is the Mystery of the gospel.

The mystery of the gospel is that God chooses to open the eyes of some and close the eyes of others in order to accomplish his good, wise, and perfect plans.

Part of God's perfect, wise, and good plan here that Paul is alluding to is spelled out in Romans 11. Paul continues expounding the mystery of the gospel by demonstrating that God actually hardened the hearts of the Jewish people SO THAT the gentiles could be brought in. Listen to what he says in Romans 11:

“So I ask, did they stumble in order that they might fall? By no means! Rather, through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous. <sup>12</sup> Now if their trespass means riches for the world, and if their failure means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion<sup>[b]</sup> mean!

<sup>13</sup> Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry <sup>14</sup> in order somehow to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them. <sup>15</sup> For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead?” (Romans 11:11-15 ESV)

Paul says that through the failure and trespass of the Israelite people, salvation has come to the Gentiles. YET, yet this is done in turn to make the Jews jealous and lead to their salvation as well.

Listen, sometimes there is a temptation to recoil at this truth. Sometimes there is a temptation to make this truth harder to hear than it really is.

It is a good thing that God is sovereign over salvation. It is good thing that our salvation is not based upon our own strength and ability to respond to God. We have proven over and over again that we are not capable of choosing God over ourselves. Left to our own devices we never choose God. So, he must intervene. He has to change our hearts by his grace, he needs to open our eyes to see.

Remember that we have to let Scripture interpret Scripture, so we have to allow what we read in 2 Peter 3 for example to inform how we understand Romans 9-11. In 2 Peter 3:8-9 Peter writes:

“But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. 9 The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.” (2 Peter 3:8-9 ESV)

When we take these passages together, we get a more complete picture. We see that God, in his perfect plan, is orchestrating all of human history to save the maximum number of people. He is using a temporary hardening of the Jewish hearts in order to bring the Gentiles in, and then uses that to bring in more Jews.

I love the way that the Apostle Paul ends Romans 11. He lays out this difficult process that can be hard for us to fully grasp and he concludes with this proclamation:

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

34 “For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?”

35 “Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?”

36 For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen. (Romans 11:33-36 ESV)

This is the mystery of the gospel. God in his unsearchable, inscrutable, perfect judgement has hardened the hearts of the Jewish people. He has made them unable to see, hear, and respond appropriately to the gospel message. The fact that the gospel is an “open secret” and can only be understood by supernatural revelation from God is the mystery of the Gospel, and it leads directly into the third thing we learn about the gospel from Paul’s message which is:

### **3. The Progress of the Gospel**

The progress of the gospel is demonstrated THROUGH the working out of the mystery of the gospel. As Paul says in Ephesians 3:

“When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, 5 which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit. 6 This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.” (Ephesians 3:4-6 ESV)

We have seen that God hardens the hearts of the Jewish people. He has removed their ability to see and respond to the gospel in order to bring the Gentiles in, in order to advance the spread of the gospel. As Paul says to the Jewish leaders in Rome:

“Therefore, let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.” (Acts 28:28 ESV)

As we noted earlier this morning, Luke is demonstrating the progress and trajectory of the gospel movement from Christ through the Church. He is bringing the book of Acts to a close.

Remember what Jesus said to the disciples in Acts 1:8:

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” (Acts 1:8 ESV)

That is what we are seeing here. That’s the progression. From Jerusalem to all Judea, to Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Last week we talked about how the work of Christ was continuing through Paul to far distant places.

This is that.

I love the way John Polhill captures this Idea.

“The passage is thus not so much about Jewish exclusion as it is about Gentile inclusion in God’s people. Acts is primarily the story of the inclusive gospel: God’s salvation (*sōtēriōn*) has been sent to all.”<sup>4</sup>

Acts is primarily the story of the inclusive gospel: God’s salvation has been sent to all.

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<sup>4</sup> John B. Polhill, *Acts*, vol. 26, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 545.

The gospel is bigger than the Jewish people thought, It is bigger even than the disciples understood. It is bigger than we can truly comprehend. It is WIDE. It is EXPANSIVE. It is ALL ENCOMPASSING. God's salvation has been sent to ALL. To people of every tribe nation and tongue on Earth.

The book of Acts teaches us that the gospel is bigger and more expansive than our wildest imaginations.

And the book of Acts teaches us that the gospel can't be stopped.

Look at how the book of Acts ends. Look at the last two verses, Acts 28:30-31 with me now.

“<sup>30</sup> He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, <sup>31</sup>proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.” (Acts 28:30-31 ESV)

Paul continued preaching the gospel with all boldness and without hindrance. The gospel goes forward. It makes progress. Christians, people whose eyes have been opened, who have seen Jesus for who he is, who have turned from their sin and put their faith in him; Christians have been proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ since the beginning and they CAN NOT and WILL NOT BE STOPPED.

The progress of the gospel CAN NOT BE STOPPED.

Throughout Acts we have seen that no threats, no punishments, no imprisonments, no storms at sea, not even death can stop the gospel from making its way to the ends of the earth. Nothing can stop the work of Jesus continuing in the world through Christians in far distant places. Nothing can stop the progress of the gospel.

Throughout the book of Acts, Luke teaches us these lessons. He reminds us of the breadth and beauty of the gospel message for ALL people, he reminds us of the unstoppable progress of the gospel by God's grace and power working in the Church, and he invites us to join in the mission.

Luke kicks down the door and says “Go. There is nothing holding you back, there is nothing stopping you from making disciples of all nations. Go and do it.”

There are no restrictions on who the gospel is for. God’s message of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ is for ALL people. There is nothing stopping you from sharing the gospel with your coworker, your friend, your family member. There is nothing stopping you from sharing the gospel other than YOU.

Listen friends, I know we wrestled through the mystery of the gospel and God’s sovereignty over salvation, and I want you to see the beauty of that truth. You see, salvation does not depend on our ability or our strength. And because of that, neither does our evangelism. The gospel is like a dog whistle. It doesn’t matter how well I blow the whistle. It doesn’t matter if I mastered the recorder in grade school and can play a lovely tune. All I have to do is be faithful in blowing on the whistle and those who have been given ears to hear will hear... and they will come.

There is such beauty and such freedom in this truth. It doesn’t matter how articulate you are. It doesn't matter how confident you are. It doesn't matter how gifted you are in evangelism. ALL THAT MATTERS is that you are faithful, that you do it.

All that matters is that you join in with what God is doing in the world.

Because if you are faithful in sharing the gospel. If you are telling others about who Jesus is and what he has done, then those who have been given ears to hear will come. That’s it. End of story. The gospel cannot and will not be stopped.

The gospel is bigger than we can imagine, and more powerful than we think. The good news of Jesus Christ began right from the very beginning. Luke traced it from the Old Testament through Jesus Christ, and he has laid out the progression of the gospel for us to witness, to be encouraged by, and to participate in.

This is the progress of the gospel. This is the heart of the book of Acts. This is the word of the Lord. Let's pray together.