

The background of the entire page is a dark blue map of the Mediterranean region, including parts of Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East. The map is rendered in a lighter blue/white color, showing coastlines, major cities, and geographical features. The word "Acts" is prominently displayed in the upper center in a large, bold, white serif font. Below it, the subtitle "The Rise of the Church" is written in a smaller, white, cursive script font. In the bottom right corner, the text "Anchor Church | Part 3" is written in a white, sans-serif font.

Acts

The Rise of the Church

Anchor Church | Part 3

Acts

Part 3 - 20:1-28:31

Anchor Church | Summer 2018

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Acts

Introduction

The book of Acts gives us the majority of our information on the life and mission of the early church during the time of the apostles. It is written by Luke and is meant to be read in conjunction with the book of Luke. Luke reveals the identity of Jesus as the Jewish Messiah. He presents Jesus as the fulfillment of the Old Testament (the Jewish scriptures). Acts continues the story of what Jesus has begun and is now advancing through the lives of his followers. It begins with the resurrected Jesus appearing and instructing the apostles for forty days about the kingdom of God he is ushering in. This new kingdom has begun bursting forth into the world with his life, death and resurrection and will continue as he sends the Holy Spirit to empower believers to be his witnesses, sharing the good news that there is grace and mercy available to all who repent and believe in Jesus for the forgiveness of their sins.

Acts frames much of the works of the apostles in the same way that Luke tells of the works of Jesus. Jesus is establishing a new kind of community, a people who have been given new hearts—hearts that are able to love God and love others. This ability to love marks this new community as unique. In addition, the reality of this dawning kingdom changes the way Jesus' followers see the world. They are willing to alter their lives to advance the gospel message, and even undergo suffering and persecution because they believe that Jesus is redeeming creation and forming an eternal kingdom in which they will live forever. They are willing to offer their lives to accomplish this mission, and are able to make disciples of the nations through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit.

The giving of the Holy Spirit marks the fulfillment of OT expectations found in Ezekiel 36:24-27 and Joel 2:28-32 where the Holy Spirit is poured out on God's people, as well as other passages like Deuteronomy 30:6 and Jeremiah 31:31-34 where

God is doing a new work in people's hearts. This giving of the Holy Spirit marks a new reality for believers. Before the fall, God dwelt with Adam and Eve. But after the fall in Genesis 3, they lose this special access to God. When God instructs Israel to build the tabernacle and then the temple, the people are able to be in the presence of God again but only in his vicinity. A high priest is required to mediate between Israel and God. Only he can go into the Holy of Holies, an area sanctioned off by a veil. When Jesus comes, he is God in the flesh, come to dwell with man. At his death, the veil is torn in the Holy of Holies, representing the access we have to the Father through Jesus. After Jesus' resurrection and ascension, he sends the Holy Spirit who not only is with us, but dwells in us if we know Jesus as Lord, making us new creations. We have direct access to God through the work of Jesus and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in a way that God's people have not experienced before. It is a foreshadowing of the day spoken of in Revelation 21, when we will dwell again in the full presence of God.

This indwelling of the Holy Spirit makes Christians drastically different from the world around them in Acts. There is a unity and love between groups that are radically different. Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor—all are of equal dignity. Luke shows a church that breaks bread together regardless of social status, depicting the gospel as radically inclusive of all who recognize their need for Jesus. This love and unity is the greatest apologetic for the gospel.

What we see in Acts is the building of the kingdom through the witness of the church by the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. We are meant to live in light of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection as faithful witnesses as we await the consummation of God's redemptive plan. Like the early church, we are meant to know Jesus and make him known.

Week 1

Acts 20:1-16 – Comfort in the Power of the Spirit

By Harvey Edwards IV

Introduction

I often find it difficult to discuss the truths of Scripture that are so comforting to me. This is not because I don't believe them, but instead I know how fantastic they must sound to those who do not believe in Jesus. Stories like the resurrection of Eutychus demonstrate the power of the Spirit over life and death and evidence the dawning of the new kingdom that Jesus is bringing. But if I am honest, there is a part of me that wishes that these kinds of miracles happened all of the time and I could easily point nonbelievers to them, or that resurrection stayed neatly in the spiritual realm. But what does this reveal about me? It shows that I must humble myself before the Lord and trust in his plan and his revealed Word. He knows far better than me what should be revealed about his plans and purposes. Instead of squirming at the thought of sharing from passages recounting miracles, I should find comfort that God cares, that he is active in his world, and that he gives evidence of his resurrection power. I should trust that the Holy Spirit will use these stories to comfort and convict others just as he has used them to comfort and convict me.

Read Acts 20:1-16 together

Weekly Questions

1. What does this passage say about God, who He is, and what He does? (Father, Son, and Spirit)
2. What does this passage teach me about me?
3. What comfort/promise/challenge can I take away from this passage?

4. How will I respond or live differently because of what I've read?

Supplemental Questions

1. How do you respond to stories of miracles in Scripture?
 2. What do the miracles performed in New Testament teach us about the kingdom of God?
 3. How does the promise of the resurrection affect how you live your life?
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Commentary

20:1-6 – *After the uproar ceased, Paul sent for the disciples, and after encouraging them, he said farewell and departed for Macedonia. ² When he had gone through those regions and had given them much encouragement, he came to Greece. ³ There he spent three months, and when a plot was made against him by the Jews as he was about to set sail for Syria, he decided to return through Macedonia. ⁴ Sopater the Berean, son of Pyrrhus, accompanied him; and of the Thessalonians, Aristarchus and Secundus; and Gaius of Derbe, and Timothy; and the Asians, Tychicus and Trophimus. ⁵ These went on ahead and were waiting for us at Troas, ⁶ but we sailed away from Philippi after the days of Unleavened Bread, and in five days we came to them at Troas, where we stayed for seven days.*

Other passages of Scripture (Rom 15:25-28; 2 Cor 8:18) tell us that during Paul's travels mentioned here, he had gathered a collection from the Gentile churches for the church at Jerusalem. Most likely, those listed here are the representatives sent with Paul to deliver the gift to the church in Jerusalem.

20:7-16 – ⁷ *On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul talked with them, intending to*

depart on the next day, and he prolonged his speech until midnight. ⁸ There were many lamps in the upper room where we were gathered. ⁹ And a young man named Eutychus, sitting at the window, sank into a deep sleep as Paul talked still longer. And being overcome by sleep, he fell down from the third story and was taken up dead. ¹⁰ But Paul went down and bent over him, and taking him in his arms, said, "Do not be alarmed, for his life is in him." ¹¹ And when Paul had gone up and had broken bread and eaten, he conversed with them a long while, until daybreak, and so departed. ¹² And they took the youth away alive, and were not a little comforted.

¹³ But going ahead to the ship, we set sail for Assos, intending to take Paul aboard there, for so he had arranged, intending himself to go by land. ¹⁴ And when he met us at Assos, we took him on board and went to Mitylene. ¹⁵ And sailing from there we came the following day opposite Chios; the next day we touched at Samos; and the day after that we went to Miletus. ¹⁶ For Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus, so that he might not have to spend time in Asia, for he was hastening to be at Jerusalem, if possible, on the day of Pentecost.

Before leaving Troas, Paul is teaching the believers late into the evening. It seems he has much to share before he leaves. Being late, Eutychus falls asleep sitting in a window and tumbles out to his death. What takes place next is a miracle that again demonstrates the life-giving power of the Holy Spirit. Paul raises Eutychus from the dead. Luke does not shy away from reporting the miracles that occur. Jesus has overcome sin and death through his life, death, and resurrection. These stories of miracles, particularly resurrection, show us the reality of his power and the dawning of the new kingdom—a kingdom in which the effects of sin and death are coming undone. We should be comforted as we read them.

The Main Point

The resurrection of Eutychus shows the power of the Spirit over death and the dawning of the new kingdom.

A Few Relevant Scriptures

New Testament Passages

- Romans 15:25-28
- 1 Corinthians 15

Week 2

Acts 20:17-38 – Paul Prepares the Ephesian Elders

By Harvey Edwards IV

Introduction

Occasionally in life there are moments of immense gravity. These often occur in times of transition, particularly when we are saying goodbye. I will never forget leaving for seminary and receiving a letter from my dad. He wrote to encourage me, to instruct me, and to tell me of his love for me. After reading it, I knew he would love me no matter what happened, but I also wanted to grow into the kind of man he believed I could become. It was a pivotal moment in my life, not only because of what my dad wrote, but also because of the moment in time that the letter was received.

This is what Paul is doing for the Ephesian elders. He is laying out for them the kind of leaders they are meant to be. He has instructed them. He has modeled Christian leadership for them. And now he is leaving them with a few final words of wisdom.

Read Acts 20:17-38 together

Weekly Questions

1. What does this passage say about God, who He is, and what He does? (Father, Son, and Spirit)
2. What does this passage teach me about me?
3. What comfort/promise/challenge can I take away from this passage?
4. How will I respond or live differently because of what I've read?

Supplemental Questions

1. Have you ever had someone speak into your life in a pivotal moment of transition? If so, what was that like?
 2. If you were receiving parting advice from a spiritual mentor, what advice might they give you? Are there warnings they would give you? In what areas would they encourage you? In what areas would they challenge you?
 3. Paul did not shy away from sharing the gospel and thus was free of regret in that area of his life. Can you say the same? Who might you need to share the gospel with?
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Commentary

20:17-35 – ¹⁷ Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him. ¹⁸ And when they came to him, he said to them:

“You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, ¹⁹ serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews; ²⁰ how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, ²¹ testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. ²² And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, ²³ except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. ²⁴ But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. ²⁵ And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again. ²⁶ Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, ²⁷ for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God. ²⁸ Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made

you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. ²⁹ I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; ³⁰ and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. ³¹ Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears. ³² And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified. ³³ I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. ³⁴ You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. ³⁵ In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

Paul calls the Ephesian elders together for a farewell address. As is often the case in goodbyes, Paul desires to dispense some final wisdom to those who will lead the church at Ephesus. Paul begins by reminding these leaders of his service to the Lord, of his humility, of his suffering at the hands of the Jews, and of his declaration of the whole truth of the gospel—both the repentance of sins and the necessary accompanying faith in Jesus Christ. Paul reminds them of these things because of their position as elders of the church. They should be like Paul, boldly sharing the gospel out of love for Jesus and a desire to see others come to a saving faith in him, even if it costs them personally.

Paul is able to confidently say these things because he has personally felt the cost of discipleship. He has been in the trenches, so to speak, and is knowingly headed back for more. The Holy Spirit is leading Paul to Jerusalem, and though Paul is unsure of what exactly will happen, the Holy Spirit has informed him that imprisonments and afflictions await him. But look how Paul responds to this knowledge. He does not cower in fear, but is

determined to live in a manner consistent with his life as a follower of Jesus. He will testify to the gospel of the grace of God, seeing the completion of this task as worth more to him than his life. This kind of surety in the implications of the gospel is a powerful witness not only to the Ephesian elders, but also to us as we read.

Paul knows that he will not see these people again. But look at the freedom he feels because of his faithfulness in presenting the gospel. He says that he is innocent of the blood of all. Why? Because he has preached the gospel. All who have been around Paul have heard the truth—that there is forgiveness and salvation through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Paul cannot make anyone believe, but he has presented the message by which they can be saved. Can we say the same? Have we provided all of our friends and family access to the gospel by which they can be saved?

Paul then charges the Ephesian elders to take care that they are faithful in the task the Holy Spirit has assigned them. He has made them overseers of the church of God, caretakers of those bought by the precious blood of Jesus. Paul knows that there are those who will seek to harm the church, both inside and out. Paul describes these people as wolves among sheep, a picture that implies imminent danger to the people of God. These people will arise even among those who appear to be leaders. There will be false teaching that leads some away from the truth. In response to the spiritual dangers, Paul calls them to be alert, to guard the church as he did.

Finally, Paul gives them the key to fulfill the task the Spirit has given them—to look to God and the word of his grace that is able to build them up and bring them to the inheritance that belongs to all who are being saved. This spiritual inheritance is worth far more than silver or gold, and for this reason, there is no need to covet. There is often a temptation for leaders to abuse their position for financial gain. Paul reminds them that this

behavior is unworthy of believers. Rather they should work to help the weak, remembering that Jesus taught that it is more blessed to give than receive.

20:36-38 – ³⁶ *And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all.* ³⁷ *And there was much weeping on the part of all; they embraced Paul and kissed him,* ³⁸ *being sorrowful most of all because of the word he had spoken, that they would not see his face again. And they accompanied him to the ship.*

Goodbyes can be hard. Paul and the elders both realize that they will not see one another again on this side of eternity. But they also know that they will see one another again in heaven or when Jesus returns. At these times, it is important for us to cling tightly to the hope we have in Jesus.

The Main Point

The calling to follow Christ and to shepherd others in the body will not be easy, but we must, like Jesus, give of ourselves and stand in the word of grace.

A Few Relevant Scriptures

New Testament Passages

- Matthew 7:15-20
- Colossians 1:24-29
- 2 Timothy 4:6-8

Week 3

Acts 21:1-16 – The Importance of the Task at Hand

By Harvey Edwards IV

Introduction

Did you ever have a moment growing up where you wandered off from your parents and found yourself lost? Do you remember that feeling of panic? All of the sudden, the world that seemed so safe a moment ago is filled with uncertainty. Now think about the feeling of relief, of safety when you are reunited with your parent. For a young child, there is nothing like the assurance provided by the proximity of a loving parent—the person they know will take care of them.

This is the assurance Paul has in the face of upcoming trials. He knows that God has chosen a difficult task for him. He knows that he will suffer for the name of Jesus. But he also knows that God loves him, that he proved it in the work of Jesus, and that as a child, he is eternally secure. Do we live with that kind of assurance?

Read Acts 21:1-16 together

Weekly Questions

1. What does this passage say about God, who He is, and what He does? (Father, Son, and Spirit)
2. What does this passage teach me about me?
3. What comfort/promise/challenge can I take away from this passage?
4. How will I respond or live differently because of what I've read?

Supplemental Questions

1. Have you ever experienced a time that you did not

understand why God allowed you to go through a hard circumstance? What thoughts were going through your mind at the time?

2. Why does God allow us to walk through difficult circumstances sometimes?
 3. What promises does Scripture present to help us through difficult circumstances?
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Commentary

21:1-16 – *And when we had parted from them and set sail, we came by a straight course to Cos, and the next day to Rhodes, and from there to Patara. ²And having found a ship crossing to Phoenicia, we went aboard and set sail. ³When we had come in sight of Cyprus, leaving it on the left we sailed to Syria and landed at Tyre, for there the ship was to unload its cargo. ⁴And having sought out the disciples, we stayed there for seven days. And through the Spirit they were telling Paul not to go on to Jerusalem. ⁵When our days there were ended, we departed and went on our journey, and they all, with wives and children, accompanied us until we were outside the city. And kneeling down on the beach, we prayed ⁶and said farewell to one another. Then we went on board the ship, and they returned home.*

⁷When we had finished the voyage from Tyre, we arrived at Ptolemais, and we greeted the brothers and stayed with them for one day. ⁸On the next day we departed and came to Caesarea, and we entered the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, and stayed with him. ⁹He had four unmarried daughters, who prophesied. ¹⁰While we were staying for many days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. ¹¹And 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."

¹⁵ After these days we got ready and went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁶ And some of the disciples from Caesarea went with us, bringing us to the house of Mnason of Cyprus, an early disciple, with whom we should lodge.

Paul knows tribulations await him as he makes his way towards Jerusalem. He has already mentioned in his farewell address to the Ephesian elders that he is going to Jerusalem, "constrained by the Holy Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me" (Acts 20:22-23). As he travels there, led by the Holy Spirit, believers are telling him not to go on to Jerusalem. This can be confusing because it says that they are doing this "through the Spirit." What's more, in the house of Philip the evangelist, a prophet named Agabus comes down from Judea and binds Paul with his own belt, saying that the Holy Spirit says, "This is how the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles." How can the Spirit be leading Paul to Jerusalem at the same time that he is using other believers to warn Paul of the afflictions ahead?

Paul is not seeking out difficulty. Rather, he has been given a task that will be difficult. Through Paul's suffering, the name of Jesus will be lifted up. That believers urge Paul not to go when the Spirit tells them what will happen to him is the normal reaction. But Paul has been given his task and walks in the power of the Holy Spirit to accomplish this, to suffer for the name of Jesus. In so doing, he shows the true value of Jesus, that he is worth more

than this life. He wants others to hear, believe, and receive salvation no matter the cost. This is a common theme in Paul's writings (Rom 8:16-17; 2 Cor 4:7-12; 6:4-10; 11:23-29; 12:10; Col 1:24-29). For instance, look at 2 Corinthians 12:10, "For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

Because of Paul's belief that he is secure in the hands of his savior, these warnings do not cause Paul to fear, but rather to know he is in the care of a sovereign God. In his commentary on Acts, John Polhill says of Paul's interaction with Agabus, "Agabus's act prepared Paul for the events to come and assured him of God's presence in those events." Those who hear Agabus's prediction try to convince Paul not to go, but look how he responds, "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" (Acts 21:13) His friends' pleas break his heart. Paul does not want to be separated from them. But he knows what he must do. His love for Jesus and his desire to make him known no matter the cost overshadow the temporariness of this life. And when his friends see his resolve, they too are able to say, "Let the will of the Lord be done" (Acts 21:14).

We have a sovereign God who is in control, working out his plans and purposes. Remember Paul's conversion. Ananias received a vision where the Lord told him to visit Paul and say, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name" (Acts 9:15-16). Paul will suffer, not because God is making him pay for his old sins, but because Paul is being given an opportunity to highlight the worthiness of the name of Jesus. In his suffering, his continued testimony to the gospel is an act of worship and witness that displays the power of the gospel to change hearts

and lives. And through his imprisonment and suffering, he will have the opportunity to preach the gospel to those he would never come in contact with otherwise.

The Main Point

Are we ready to give our lives for the name of Christ? Do you believe he is worth more than this world has to offer?

A Few Relevant Scriptures

New Testament Passages

- Romans 8:16-17
- 2 Corinthians 4:7-12; 6:3-10; 11:23-29; 12:10
- Colossians 1:24-29

Week 4

Acts 21:17-23:10 – Opportunity in the Trials

By Harvey Edwards IV

Introduction

A few people in this world just like to work out. I'm not one of those people and never have been. Even when I was young, I used to hate spring training for basketball. I loved the game of basketball, but spring training had very little to do with basketball other than getting in shape. In fact, we hardly touched a basketball in spring training. I remember sitting in my classes dreading the end of school because that meant another day of spring training. I whined. I let it suck the joy out of my days. I was just a big baby about it. But all of my complaining disappeared once the basketball season started. We were always in the best shape. We ran even teams that were better than us into the ground just because they got tired, and we didn't. And when we ended the year with a state championship, I had to admit that all the running had a purpose—to provide us with an opportunity we would not have had otherwise.

Paul experiences all kinds of hardships as he approaches Jerusalem sharing the gospel. No one likes hardships. But God uses these hardships to provide Paul with an opportunity he would not otherwise have had—to present the gospel to those who would never hear it otherwise.

We don't always have the benefit of seeing how God is using the difficulties that we may go through, but we do know that he is in control. In Ephesians 2:10, Paul says, "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." No matter our circumstances as believers, God is using what you are going through as an opportunity for you to give him glory.

Read Acts 21:17-23:10 together.

Weekly Questions

1. What does this passage say about God, who He is, and what He does? (Father, Son, and Spirit)
2. What does this passage teach me about me?
3. What comfort/promise/challenge can I take away from this passage?
4. How will I respond or live differently because of what I've read?

Supplemental Questions

1. What are some trials that you have been through?
2. Have you been able to see how God has used difficulty in your life to bring himself glory? If not, have you been open to seeing your trial that way? If so, how did God use it?
3. What makes it hard to have this kind of outlook on trials in our lives?

Commentary

21:17-26 - *When we had come to Jerusalem, the brothers received us gladly. ¹⁸ On the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. ¹⁹ After greeting them, he related one by one the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. ²⁰ And when they heard it, they glorified God. And they said to him, "You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed. They are all zealous for the law, ²¹ and they have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or walk according to our customs. ²² What then is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come. ²³ Do therefore what we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow; ²⁴ take these men and purify*

yourself along with them and pay their expenses, so that they may shave their heads. Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you, but that you yourself also live in observance of the law. ²⁵*But as for the Gentiles who have believed, we have sent a letter with our judgment that they should abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality.”* ²⁶*Then Paul took the men, and the next day he purified himself along with them and went into the temple, giving notice when the days of purification would be fulfilled and the offering presented for each one of them.*

As Paul comes to Jerusalem, he will begin to experience some of the difficulties for which the Holy Spirit has been preparing him (see last week’s commentary). It is important to remember that there is a purpose for this: What God told Paul through Ananias is coming true—he is God’s chosen instrument to carry his name “before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel” (Acts 9:15). Many of these opportunities will come because of the suffering that Paul endures. This is a reminder to us that we must have an eternal mindset. God is at work through our suffering, working for our good and his glory (see Romans 8:18-30).

From the moment of his arrival in Jerusalem, there is unrest. A rumor has been spreading among the Jews that Paul is encouraging the Jews who live among the Gentiles to abandon their Jewishness: to jettison the rituals like circumcision that identify the Jews as God’s people. Paul has not done this. He has preached that the law is unable to save, but he has no problem with the Jews continuing their customs as long as they understand that salvation is available to all and that it is only through trust in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Paul has no problem with continuing in these traditions. In 1 Corinthians 9:19-20 Paul says, “For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant

to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law.” He wants the way to salvation to be communicated as clearly as possible.

Part of the problem comes from the political situation. This was a time of increasing political unrest for the Jews. There were many insurrections leading to increasingly brutal governing. All this led to growing resentment toward the Romans in particular and Gentiles in general. Paul’s mission to the Gentiles and his firm stance that they do not need to come under the law has made many suspicious of him. James and the Jewish leaders are celebrating the success of the gospel among the Gentiles, but also aware of how the Jewish misconceptions as a whole, and even the Jewish Christians’ misconceptions of Paul’s teachings might hinder the advancement of the gospel message among the Jews. In an attempt to clarify Paul’s position towards the Law, specifically that he is not hostile to it, they ask him to participate in one of the Jewish customs. Paul is open to this. As Polhill states, “Paul saw one’s status in Christ as transcending the distinction between Jew and Gentile (Gal 3:28). Being in Christ neither required that the Gentile become a Jew nor that the Jew cease to be a Jew (cf. 1 Cor 9:19f.).”¹ His desire is to present clearly the message that Jesus is the way to salvation for Jews and Gentiles.

21:27-36 - *When the seven days were almost completed, the Jews from Asia, seeing him in the temple, stirred up the whole crowd and laid hands on him, ²⁸ crying out, “Men of Israel, help! This is the man who is teaching everyone everywhere against the people and the law and this place. Moreover, he even brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place.” ²⁹ For they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian with him in the city, and*

¹ John B. Polhill, *Acts*, vol. 26, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 448.

they supposed that Paul had brought him into the temple. ³⁰ Then all the city was stirred up, and the people ran together. They seized Paul and dragged him out of the temple, and at once the gates were shut. ³¹ And as they were seeking to kill him, word came to the tribune of the cohort that all Jerusalem was in confusion. ³² He at once took soldiers and centurions and ran down to them. And when they saw the tribune and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul. ³³ Then the tribune came up and arrested him and ordered him to be bound with two chains. He inquired who he was and what he had done. ³⁴ Some in the crowd were shouting one thing, some another. And as he could not learn the facts because of the uproar, he ordered him to be brought into the barracks. ³⁵ And when he came to the steps, he was actually carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the crowd, ³⁶ for the mob of the people followed, crying out, "Away with him!"

Although Paul attempts to demonstrate that he is not against the Jewish law, but rather for clarity of the gospel message, the Jewish crowds are so riled up that they lash out against him. It is important to note that many of those caught up in the mob mentality have probably not heard Paul's true position regarding the law, but rather have allowed themselves to be so incensed by the rumors floating around that they feel they do not need to hear what Paul has to say. This is a good warning for our culture. We live in a time of polarized opinions. We are often quick to judge people. Instead of being driven by emotions like fear or anger, we should calmly gather the facts and weigh people's positions against the Scriptures, not just against what is popular in our social or cultural circles.

These people are unable to do this. They try to kill Paul, but the city is in such an uproar that the city officials hear and investigate. They arrest Paul and carry him out, struggling to save him from the violent crowd.

21:37-22:21 - As Paul was about to be brought into the barracks, he said to the tribune, "May I say something to you?" And he said, "Do you know Greek?"³⁸ Are you not the Egyptian, then, who recently stirred up a revolt and led the four thousand men of the Assassins out into the wilderness?"³⁹ Paul replied, "I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no obscure city. I beg you, permit me to speak to the people."⁴⁰ And when he had given him permission, Paul, standing on the steps, motioned with his hand to the people. And when there was a great hush, he addressed them in the Hebrew language, saying:

"Brothers and fathers, hear the defense that I now make before you."

² And when they heard that he was addressing them in the Hebrew language, they became even more quiet. And he said:

³ "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day. ⁴ I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women, ⁵ as the high priest and the whole council of elders can bear me witness. From them I received letters to the brothers, and I journeyed toward Damascus to take those also who were there and bring them in bonds to Jerusalem to be punished.

⁶ "As I was on my way and drew near to Damascus, about noon a great light from heaven suddenly shone around me. ⁷ And I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?' ⁸ And I answered, 'Who are you, Lord?' And he said to me, 'I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting.'⁹ Now those who were with me saw the light but did not understand the voice of the one who was speaking to me.

¹⁰ And I said, 'What shall I do, Lord?' And the Lord said to me, 'Rise, and go into Damascus, and there you will be told all that is appointed for you to do.'¹¹ And since I could not see because of the brightness of that light, I was led by the hand by those who

were with me, and came into Damascus.

¹² “And one Ananias, a devout man according to the law, well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there, ¹³ came to me, and standing by me said to me, ‘Brother Saul, receive your sight.’ And at that very hour I received my sight and saw him. ¹⁴ And he said, ‘The God of our fathers appointed you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear a voice from his mouth; ¹⁵ for you will be a witness for him to everyone of what you have seen and heard. ¹⁶ And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name.’

¹⁷ “When I had returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, I fell into a trance ¹⁸ and saw him saying to me, ‘Make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about me.’ ¹⁹ And I said, ‘Lord, they themselves know that in one synagogue after another I imprisoned and beat those who believed in you. ²⁰ And when the blood of Stephen your witness was being shed, I myself was standing by and approving and watching over the garments of those who killed him.’ ²¹ And he said to me, ‘Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles.’”

As the Romans are about to take Paul into the barracks, he asks to address the crowd. Although the commander originally mistakes him as a revolutionary, after discovering his mistake, he allows Paul to address the crowds. Paul then gives his defense against the accusations of teaching against the Jewish people, their law, and the temple. Paul’s defense is in reality a defense for his preaching of the gospel.

Paul begins by showing not only his Jewish roots and his training in Judaism, but also his zeal to see what he thought were corruptions to the law stamped out. But something changed his mind. God appeared to him and showed him that in opposing Jesus, he was opposing God and the fulfillment of the very things he hoped for as a Jew – the coming of the Messiah and the

dawning of the kingdom of God. This was unexpected for Paul, but now that he has seen the true identity of Jesus, he is compelled to witness to the truth. He is called to be a witness, both to the Jew, though many will reject him, and to the Gentiles. Paul notes that he is not the only Jew to see the truth. God led “a devout man according to the law” (Acts 22:12) named Ananias to heal him of the blindness he suffered on the road to Damascus and to share God’s plan for Paul. Paul is showing that rather than Jesus being at odds with a loyalty to Judaism, he is the fulfillment of the Jewish expectations. This is true even if the Jews refuse to see the truth.

Paul’s defense for himself is a defense for what God has done in Jesus—provided the only way for Jews AND Gentiles to be made right with God, just as the Jewish Scriptures foretold.

22:22-29 - *Up to this word they listened to him. Then they raised their voices and said, “Away with such a fellow from the earth! For he should not be allowed to live.”²³ And as they were shouting and throwing off their cloaks and flinging dust into the air,²⁴ the tribune ordered him to be brought into the barracks, saying that he should be examined by flogging, to find out why they were shouting against him like this.²⁵ But when they had stretched him out for the whips, Paul said to the centurion who was standing by, “Is it lawful for you to flog a man who is a Roman citizen and uncondemned?”²⁶ When the centurion heard this, he went to the tribune and said to him, “What are you about to do? For this man is a Roman citizen.”²⁷ So the tribune came and said to him, “Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?” And he said, “Yes.”²⁸ The tribune answered, “I bought this citizenship for a large sum.” Paul said, “But I am a citizen by birth.”²⁹ So those who were about to examine him withdrew from him immediately, and the tribune also was afraid, for he realized that Paul was a Roman citizen and that he had bound him.*

When Paul tells them of his commissioning to share the gospel with the Gentiles, they are again enraged. The tribune then orders Paul to be flogged. But here Paul surprises the tribune. He makes him aware of his Roman citizenship. Paul is not afraid to undergo what is necessary as a witness to the Lord, but he does not take a beating when one can be avoided. He exercises his rights as a Roman citizen, something God uses to place him in unexpected places to share the gospel.

22:30-23:11 - *But on the next day, desiring to know the real reason why he was being accused by the Jews, he unbound him and commanded the chief priests and all the council to meet, and he brought Paul down and set him before them.*

23 *And looking intently at the council, Paul said, "Brothers, I have lived my life before God in all good conscience up to this day."² And the high priest Ananias commanded those who stood by him to strike him on the mouth.³ Then Paul said to him, "God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall! Are you sitting to judge me according to the law, and yet contrary to the law you order me to be struck?"⁴ Those who stood by said, "Would you revile God's high priest?"⁵ And Paul said, "I did not know, brothers, that he was the high priest, for it is written, 'You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people.'"*

⁶ *Now when Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, "Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. It is with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial."⁷ And when he had said this, a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided.⁸ For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all.⁹ Then a great clamor arose, and some of the scribes of the Pharisees' party stood up and contended sharply, "We find nothing wrong in this man. What if a spirit or an angel spoke to him?"¹⁰ And when the dissension*

became violent, the tribune, afraid that Paul would be torn to pieces by them, commanded the soldiers to go down and take him away from among them by force and bring him into the barracks.

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.”

Paul is then brought before the Jewish Sanhedrin as a way for the tribune to understand the charges against Paul. Paul continues to explain his calling to witness about the things of Jesus. He states the reason he has been brought up on trial—hope in the resurrection of the dead. At this statement, infighting breaks out in the Sanhedrin. It was made up of the Sadducees, who did not believe in a resurrection of the dead, and the Pharisees, who did. The Pharisees are ready to argue for the resurrection of the dead against the Sadducees even if they reject Jesus. But at least some of them are open to the idea that Paul may have heard from a spirit or an angel and that Jesus is the hope for eternal life.

The debate becomes so violent that Paul is taken back to the barracks. Here he is visited by the Lord, and we are reminded of God’s sovereign purpose for Paul’s arrest and trials. He has testified to the facts about Jesus in Jerusalem, and he will do the same in Rome. In times of trial, even if those times of trial are just times of boredom or confusion, it can be difficult to remember that God is in control, accomplishing his plans and purposes. If we are living in light of our identity in Jesus, we can be sure that God is using us for his good purposes. As Paul says in Ephesians 2:10, “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”

The Main Point

God gives us opportunities to bring him glory by sharing the gospel during the trials in our lives.

A Few Relevant Scriptures

New Testament Passages

- Acts 9
- Galatians 3:15-29
- Ephesians 2:10

Week 5

Acts 23:11-35 – God is in Control

By Rand Nelson

Introduction

In the 1984 box office smash, “The Karate Kid,” Daniel LaRusso routinely gets beat up by a group of guys and karate champion, Johnny Lawrence, for unknowingly befriending Johnny’s ex-girlfriend. If you haven’t seen the movie, consider your next small group fellowship planned. It’s got all the essential elements of a great 80’s flick: teenage drama, mild violence, and iconic music. It isn’t until Daniel befriends his apartment complex’s maintenance man, Mr. Miyagi, that he begins to learn how to defend himself using karate.

Mr. Miyagi works out a deal with Johnny’s karate sensei of the Cobra-Kai dojo. Johnny and his cronies have to leave Daniel completely alone while he trains for a tournament in which they will face off and settle the matter once and for all. In one scene, Daniel shows off to Johnny’s ex-girlfriend in front of all the Cobra-Kai guys. Knowing they’re not allowed to beat up on him until the tournament, he parades in front of them, teasing them and joking around. I always loved this scene as a kid. Daniel is so confident, knowing that Mr. Miyagi (and the arrangement with Johnny’s sensei) means that he can’t be touched.

In the following text, we see Paul move from being on the receiving end of a fairly constant line of imprisonments, beatings and all-around abuse, to parading victoriously in front of his enemies, knowing they can’t touch him. Jesus is a far better teacher and friend than Mr. Miyagi, and despite whatever trial we are going through, as believers, we can trust that he is with us.

Read Acts 23:11-35 together

Weekly Questions

1. What does this passage say about God, who He is, and what He does? (Father, Son, and Spirit)
2. What does this passage teach me about me?
3. What comfort/promise/challenge can I take away from this passage?
4. How will I respond or live differently because of what I've read?

Supplemental Questions

1. Describe a time when you have seen God's plan unfold to deliver you from a terrible situation, to turn something awful into something beautiful, or to protect you through unlikely means.
 2. In what circumstances in your life are you currently having trouble seeing God's hand at work?
 3. What can we learn about God from how he delivered Paul from the 40 Jewish men who sought to kill him?
 4. What encouragement can you draw from Jesus' presence with Paul in the direst of circumstances?
-

Commentary

23:11-15 – *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."*

¹² *When it was day, the Jews made a plot and bound themselves by an oath neither to eat nor drink till they had killed Paul.* ¹³ *There were more than forty who made this conspiracy.*

¹⁴ *They went to the chief priests and elders and said, "We have strictly bound ourselves by an oath to taste no food till we have killed Paul."* ¹⁵ *Now therefore you, along with the council, give notice to the tribune to bring him down to you, as though you were going to determine his case more exactly. And we are ready*

to kill him before he comes near.”

Paul has just strategically dodged a major controversy before the Jewish council. This entire section of Scripture must be framed by what takes place in verse 11. Cold, bruised and lonely in the barracks of a Jerusalem prison, Jesus Christ appears to him to encourage him. Do not miss the beauty of the words here: “the Lord stood by him.” As threats mature into actions and the death of Paul seems only to be a matter of time, Jesus stands by him and declares himself sovereign over the entire situation. “Take courage,” he says, “For as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome.” These are not hopeful words. They are not intended to highlight and find the circumstances’ silver lining. These are words declaring the will of almighty God. Paul can be encouraged not merely because the situation could be worse, but because the God who made the heavens has appeared beside him in a lonely cell, declaring the end from the beginning.

As that setting frames the verses that follow, we see the wickedness of 40 men, who vow to neither eat nor drink until they have killed Paul. They orchestrate a plan to ambush Paul while in transit to appear before the council. God has other plans.

23:16-22 – ¹⁶ *Now the son of Paul’s sister heard of their ambush, so he went and entered the barracks and told Paul. ¹⁷ Paul called one of the centurions and said, “Take this young man to the tribune, for he has something to tell him.” ¹⁸ So he took him and brought him to the tribune and said, “Paul the prisoner called me and asked me to bring this young man to you, as he has something to say to you.” ¹⁹ The tribune took him by the hand, and going aside asked him privately, “What is it that you have to tell me?” ²⁰ And he said, “The Jews have agreed to ask you to bring Paul down to the council tomorrow, as though they were going to inquire somewhat more closely about him. ²¹ But do not be persuaded by them, for more than forty of their men are lying in*

ambush for him, who have bound themselves by an oath neither to eat nor drink till they have killed him. And now they are ready, waiting for your consent.”²² So the tribune dismissed the young man, charging him, “Tell no one that you have informed me of these things.”

Paul’s nephew hears about the ambush and goes to tell Paul, who instructs him to tell the tribune. Before he can believe it, this young man is in the presence of the Jerusalem tribune, explaining how the Jews intend to kill Paul. We do not know how he overhears the plan, or the specifics of why it is so simple for him to have such a high-ranking audience. But let us not overlook the fact that the plot to kill Paul is completely foiled by what could be described as a “chance occurrence.” While we are not privileged with all of the details in the account of Scripture, we can clearly see God’s fingerprints all over this situation. Through highly unlikely circumstances, God foils the plot of the Jews and delivers his servant, Paul.

23:23-35 - ²³ *Then he called two of the centurions and said, “Get ready two hundred soldiers, with seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen to go as far as Caesarea at the third hour of the night.”²⁴ Also provide mounts for Paul to ride and bring him safely to Felix the governor.”²⁵ And he wrote a letter to this effect:*
²⁶ *“Claudius Lysias, to his Excellency the governor Felix, greetings.²⁷ This man was seized by the Jews and was about to be killed by them when I came upon them with the soldiers and rescued him, having learned that he was a Roman citizen.²⁸ And desiring to know the charge for which they were accusing him, I brought him down to their council.²⁹ I found that he was being accused about questions of their law, but charged with nothing deserving death or imprisonment.³⁰ And when it was disclosed to me that there would be a plot against the man, I sent him to you at once, ordering his accusers also to state before you what they*

have against him.”

³¹ So the soldiers, according to their instructions, took Paul and brought him by night to Antipatris. ³² And on the next day they returned to the barracks, letting the horsemen go on with him.

³³ When they had come to Caesarea and delivered the letter to the governor, they presented Paul also before him. ³⁴ On reading the letter, he asked what province he was from. And when he learned that he was from Cilicia, ³⁵ he said, “I will give you a hearing when your accusers arrive.” And he commanded him to be guarded in Herod’s praetorium.

The Tribune’s response is dramatic. He calls for two hundred soldiers, seventy horsemen, and two hundred spearmen to escort Paul (who will be riding in style) to Felix, the governor. This is not an escort that is meant to fight off the 40 men who lie in wait; this is an escort so large it dares the men to even attempt to mess with Paul. In a humiliating spoil to their plans, they would watch Paul’s company move by them, knowing they could do nothing to accomplish their vow as their stomachs’ rumble echoes their defeat.

Verse 27 informs us that Paul is afforded this privilege because of his Roman citizenship. The tribune does not desire to send Paul to Felix because he is swayed by a persuasive, evangelistic appeal, but because he is a fellow citizen of a godless, wicked empire. In all these things we see that God is not limited in his creativity to deliver his people. His guiding hand accomplishes whatever he wishes, even when—and perhaps especially when—we cannot see the victory from the battle. At the end of the text, we see Paul right where God wants him, and even if we can’t see it, that’s exactly where he has all of us as well.

The Main Point

As believers in Christ, we should trust that God will work

all things according to his perfect plan because he sovereignly ordains everything that comes to pass.

A Few Relevant Scriptures

New Testament Passages

- Romans 8:28-39
- John 16:25-33
- Psalm 23

Week 6

Acts 24:1-27 – Paul & Felix

By Aaron Barnes

Introduction

Have you ever felt you were an expert in a certain area? You read all the books. You have many conversations on the subject. You even have seen it done many times. However, when it is your time to take part in the event, you find out quickly that reading books, talking about it, and even watching someone else does not in any way prepare you for what is in store. Or let's say that I give you a book on how to properly operate a non-motorized vehicle. This vehicle is equipped with a pedal-driven crank powered by the operator's feet. The operator can change gears using a thumb lever that will enable a front derailleur and rear derailleur that will in turn then allow the operator to maneuver the vehicle at higher speeds while remaining seated during operation. What in the world did I just say? I just told you how to shift gears on a bicycle. Just from reading the last few sentences and the fact that you may already know how to ride a bike, this task seems simple. Throw a leg over the crossbar, put your foot on the opposite pedal, and away we go, right? Well, that's part of it. Imagine what it would be like if you have only heard of bicycles in other lands. Other people know about them. It is quite possible that they are well versed in bicycle riding. Since you've never seen someone riding this type of vehicle, you have no real experience to speak of nor any frame of reference to compare. Now someone shows up in your community saying that he has a bicycle. Not only that, but he is willing to show you how to ride it. The catch? You have to admit that you have no idea how to ride, nor do you truly know what a bicycle is. You've only heard about it in stories.

This is what happens to Felix. Paul shares with him the life-changing gospel of Jesus Christ over and over for two years.

Unfortunately, hearing is not enough.

Read Acts 24:1-27 together

Weekly Questions

1. What does this passage say about God, who He is, and what He does? (Father, Son, and Spirit)
2. What does this passage teach me about me?
3. What comfort/promise/challenge can I take away from this passage?
4. How will I respond or live differently because of what I've read?

Supplemental Questions

1. Given what we know about Felix, what do you think is going through his mind as Paul is preaching?
2. Given what we know about Felix, what do you think is going through Paul's mind each time Felix sends for him?
3. Has there been a time in your life that you were exposed to the gospel of Jesus Christ and you confessed your sin and repented? In other words, have you given your life to Jesus? If so, share your experience with your group. If not, what's holding you back? Would you mind sharing with the group?

Commentary

24:1-9 – *And after five days the high priest Ananias came down with some elders and a spokesman, one Tertullus. They laid before the governor their case against Paul. ²And when he had been summoned, Tertullus began to accuse him, saying:*

“Since through you we enjoy much peace, and since by your foresight, most excellent Felix, reforms are being made for

this nation, ³ in every way and everywhere we accept this with all gratitude. ⁴ But, to detain you no further, I beg you in your kindness to hear us briefly. ⁵ For we have found this man a plague, one who stirs up riots among all the Jews throughout the world and is a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes. ⁶ He even tried to profane the temple, but we seized him. ⁸ By examining him yourself you will be able to find out from him about everything of which we accuse him.”

⁹ The Jews also joined in the charge, affirming that all these things were so.

So here's a familiar scenario. Paul is in prison...this time in Caesarea. He is sent from Jerusalem to Caesarea once Claudius Lysias realizes Paul is a Roman citizen. Lysias sends him with an entourage of 200 soldiers, 70 horsemen, and 200 spearmen in order to keep him alive, 23:23-24). He fears that the Jewish leaders will kidnap and murder Paul. Felix is the Governor over that area and is stationed in Caesarea. Being a Roman citizen, Paul is required by law to be tried by Roman officials.

Tertullus, more than likely a lawyer, is attempting to “tickle the ears” of Felix in order to win him over. According to some commentators, whether or not Tertullus is a Jew or Roman is not clear, however, what can be assumed is that he has been hired by Jewish leaders to have Paul tried, convicted, and hopefully executed. Tertullus accuses Paul of three specific offenses. First, he states that Paul stirs up riots everywhere he goes (v 5). And this statement is partially true. This is what typically happens when Paul begins to share the gospel of Jesus Christ with the cities he visits. However, Paul is not stirring up riots in order to be a nuisance. He is going against the flow of culture by effectively sharing the gospel, and people are being saved. As they come to the faith, they live differently. This leads to rifts in the community and to the “riots” that he is accused of instigating. If this is a serious charge against Paul, may the

followers of Jesus live to be convicted of this same crime! Second, Paul is accused of leading the Nazarenes (v 5). *Nazarene* was a term often used to refer to those that follow Jesus and his teaching. Once again, this is partially true. But Paul was joined by many others including the leaders of the Jerusalem Council and Peter, John, and Barnabas to name a few. Lastly, Paul was accused of an attempt to profane the temple. The Jewish leaders were upset because Paul had allegedly brought Gentiles into the temple. This was a BIG no-no according to Jewish Law. Being a government official, Felix must uphold the peace of Rome no matter the cost. With Tertullus speaking kindly to him and flattering him with many words, he obliges.

24:10-21 – *And when the governor had nodded to him to speak, Paul replied:*

“Knowing that for many years you have been a judge over this nation, I cheerfully make my defense. ¹¹ You can verify that it is not more than twelve days since I went up to worship in Jerusalem, ¹² and they did not find me disputing with anyone or stirring up a crowd, either in the temple or in the synagogues or in the city. ¹³ Neither can they prove to you what they now bring up against me. ¹⁴ But this I confess to you, that according to the Way, which they call a sect, I worship the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down by the Law and written in the Prophets, ¹⁵ having a hope in God, which these men themselves accept, that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust. ¹⁶ So I always take pains to have a clear conscience toward both God and man. ¹⁷ Now after several years I came to bring alms to my nation and to present offerings. ¹⁸ While I was doing this, they found me purified in the temple, without any crowd or tumult. But some Jews from Asia— ¹⁹ they ought to be here before you and to make an accusation, should they have anything against me. ²⁰ Or else let these men themselves say what wrongdoing they found when I stood before the council, ²¹ other than this one thing that I cried

out while standing among them: 'It is with respect to the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you this day.'"

Paul makes his defense, only this time he comes out swinging with heavy gloves. Paul knows that he is up against someone that is well-versed in Roman law. He begins with the first claim (v 11-13). He had only been in Jerusalem for twelve days. Part of that time had been spent in prison. That doesn't leave much time for riot planning. To boot, the Asian Jews were the ones that were starting to get the Jews rowdy. So if anyone should be on trial for rioting, it's the Jews from Asia. Next, Paul turns to the claim that he belongs to a sect of Judaism referred to as the Nazarenes. Paul quickly lays this one to rest by responding with honesty. Paul assures Felix that as a Jew he follows a religion protected by Rome. As a follower of "the Way," Paul worships the "God of our fathers" and believes in the resurrection of the dead. This resurrection will be for both the just and the unjust. This means that there will be a day of judgment for the unjust. Lastly, Paul points out that if anyone has a legitimate claim to file against him that they should have been there personally to deliver it in court. Being that there are no accusers, Paul is basically pointing out the fact that it is an unsubstantiated claim that should be tossed out (v 14-21).

Through it all, Paul keeps the gospel at the front of everything. Each time he has been put on trial or publicly accused, he responds with the truth of Jesus. He doesn't run from the confrontation. He doesn't attempt to slip out of the questioning. He stands and delivers the truth. He has not fallen into this situation by coincidence. This is a divine opportunity that God has been preparing him for from his birth. His study with Gamaliel, his Pharisaical upbringing, his conversion, and his travels have led him to this point. Following Paul's example, we should pray for obedience in our everyday situations. Obedience in the mundane

of everyday life is faithfulness, and Paul's faithfulness over time leads Paul to this platform on this day.

24:22-27 - *But Felix, having a rather accurate knowledge of the Way, put them off, saying, "When Lysias the tribune comes down, I will decide your case."* ²³ *Then he gave orders to the centurion that he should be kept in custody but have some liberty, and that none of his friends should be prevented from attending to his needs.*

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."* ²⁶ *At the same time he hoped that money would be given him by Paul. So he sent for him often and conversed with him.* ²⁷ *When two years had elapsed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus. And desiring to do the Jews a favor, Felix left Paul in prison.*

Why does Felix postpone the judgment? Is he really waiting for Lysias to come and deliver evidence of Paul's alleged crimes? Maybe, but not likely. Does Felix believe in what Paul says about "the Way?" Is he under the conviction of the Holy Spirit? Maybe. To give some background here, Felix's wife at this time is a Jew named Drusilla. She is the daughter of Herod Agrippa I (Acts 12). This might be where Felix learns about "the Way." This might be why he knows that it is not an illegal religion in Rome. Knowing that Paul has not broken any Roman laws, and since Paul is a Roman citizen, Felix doesn't judge on the matter. He puts it off until Lysias arrives...IF Lysias arrives. Not finding him at fault, Felix does not free Paul. He knows that this would mean certain death at the hands of the Jewish leaders. It would also mean that he would be acting against the Jewish leaders' wishes. Since he has

to live with them, he thinks it best to delay any ruling (for Paul's sake) and keep him detained in prison (for the Jewish leaders' sake). Also, being a Roman citizen probably grants Paul the less strict sentence. Felix allows for friends to tend to Paul's needs while in prison.

Being a Jew herself, Drusilla has heard of Jesus. She has probably been steeped in Jewish tradition and teaching. This topic of conversation concerning the Apostle Paul has peaked her interest. For the next two years, Felix and Drusilla send for Paul and Paul shares more of his testimony. He shares the gospel. Once he begins touching on the more difficult topics, Felix sends him away. These difficult topics are self-control, righteousness, and the coming judgment (v 25). Why do these topics bother someone in Felix's position? According to Josephus and other historians, Felix is not born into royalty. Felix is a former slave. He is a Greek freedman either of Claudius, according to which theory Josephus (*Antiq.* xx. 7) calls him Claudius Felix, or for Claudius's mother Antonia Minor, a daughter of Triumvir Mark Antony to Octavia Minor and niece of Emperor Augustus. According to Tacitus, Pallas (Felix's brother) and Felix descended from the Greek Kings of Arcadia. Felix became the procurator by the petition of his brother.

A former slave who has been given a platform that he does not deserve puts him in a precarious position when Paul begins to touch on these specific topics. Felix is not the model character for godly men. He is deeply rooted in the government and will do whatever necessary to appease his constituency and secure his rule. His now wife Drusilla was married when he took her for his own. So we have a broken and sinful man in a position of authority who is also a wife-stealing adulterer. You can imagine the kind of conviction he must have been under. Not to mention Drusilla. Being steeped in that teaching and culture, now hearing the truth proclaimed clearly...let's just say the air must have been thick in the room. So much so that Felix sends Paul away.

It is easy to want to paint ourselves into this story as the apostle Paul. We've been wrongfully accused. We've been held without evidence. We are in need of rescue. However, if we are honest with ourselves, we are probably more like Felix and Drusilla than we realize. We are broken. We are sinful. In Matthew 5, Jesus says that if you even think impure thoughts of someone else that is not your spouse, you are committing adultery. He also says that if we think evil thoughts about someone else, we are in sin. How many times do we fall into that sinful snare?

We live in the Bible belt. It's difficult for us to go anywhere in the southeast and not hear someone somewhere talking about Jesus. We have been steeped in Christian tradition. Many of us have been inoculated with the gospel. Maybe we are more like Felix and Drusilla than we are like Paul. Could it be that we have been exposed to the gospel most of our lives, yet we have never repented and turned to Jesus? Have we come under the conviction of the Holy Spirit, yet never have taken that step of faith necessary for redemption? It wasn't enough for Felix and Drusilla to just hear the gospel. If they were to be redeemed, they would have to repent and confess their sin, turning to Jesus and turning from their former lives. Then they would have been truly freedmen, born again children of God. How about you? Have you taken that step of faith? If not, you can. Talk with your community group leader. Repent. Confess your sin to the Lord. You can be forgiven. You can be truly free.

The Main Point

Exposure to the gospel without repentance will not bring redemption. If we are going to be truly free, we must take that step of faith in Christ. Then we will know what it means to be redeemed, living in the hope of the gospel of Jesus.

A Few Relevant Scriptures

New Testament Passages

- Romans 10:8-13
- 2 Corinthians 5:17-6:2

Week 7

Acts 25:1-27 – Paul Appeals to Caesar

By Michael Green

Introduction

Have you ever watched an artist paint? Sometimes, in its nascent stages, it just looks like a glob of paint here and a random change of color there. But, the artist sees the finished product. The colors were chosen intentionally, the depths contoured purposefully. And, as the artist continues, a picture starts to form. The seemingly random colors and textures start to coalesce into a unique manifestation of the artist's vision.

Our LORD is extremely creative. His children are multifaceted, unique reflections of their Savior. And, the LORD is creating a masterpiece, a people for his own possession with varied backgrounds from every nation on Earth. As we participate with the Artist in his great work, he uses our particular hues and vibrancies to radiate his glory to those around us, drawing people to Himself. Our backgrounds, talents, and gifts are uniquely employed under the orchestration of the Holy Spirit with an artist's vision and a master's precision.

Read Acts 25:1-27 together

Weekly Questions

1. What does this passage say about God, who He is, and what He does? (Father, Son, and Spirit)
2. What does this passage teach me about me?
3. What comfort/promise/challenge can I take away from this passage?
4. How will I respond or live differently because of what I've read?

Supplemental Questions

1. What are some ways that your job, background, or particular personality characteristics have been used in unique ways to share the love of Christ?
 2. Has someone ever testified about Christ with such boldness that it humbled you? Describe that situation. What was your takeaway?
 3. How does the truth of the resurrection affect the believer's approach to this life? How does that compare with the typical mindset in today's world?
 4. Should Paul have just been quiet and stopped upsetting the masses with these controversial truths he was sharing? He didn't *have* to go back to Jerusalem, after all. People even tried to stop him using really sound reasoning. Why did he keep on keeping on about the resurrection of Christ instead of just enjoying his relationship with the LORD and letting bygones be bygones?
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Commentary

25:1-12 – *Now three days after Festus had arrived in the province, he went up to Jerusalem from Caesarea. ² And the chief priests and the principal men of the Jews laid out their case against Paul, and they urged him, ³ asking as a favor against Paul that he summon him to Jerusalem—because they were planning an ambush to kill him on the way. ⁴ Festus replied that Paul was being kept at Caesarea and that he himself intended to go there shortly. ⁵ “So,” said he, “let the men of authority among you go down with me, and if there is anything wrong about the man, let them bring charges against him.”*

⁶ *After he stayed among them not more than eight or ten days, he went down to Caesarea. And the next day he took his*

seat on the tribunal and ordered Paul to be brought. ⁷ When he had arrived, the Jews who had come down from Jerusalem stood around him, bringing many and serious charges against him that they could not prove. ⁸ Paul argued in his defense, “Neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar have I committed any offense.” ⁹ But Festus, wishing to do the Jews a favor, said to Paul, “Do you wish to go up to Jerusalem and there be tried on these charges before me?” ¹⁰ But Paul said, “I am standing before Caesar’s tribunal, where I ought to be tried. To the Jews I have done no wrong, as you yourself know very well. ¹¹ If then I am a wrongdoer and have committed anything for which I deserve to die, I do not seek to escape death. But if there is nothing to their charges against me, no one can give me up to them. I appeal to Caesar.” ¹² Then Festus, when he had conferred with his council, answered, “To Caesar you have appealed; to Caesar you shall go.”

Paul is savvy. He is a learned man, trained under the teacher Gamaliel who is revered among the Jews (Acts 5:34 & 22:3). Paul is a self-proclaimed “Hebrew of Hebrews” with an impressive pedigree that carries a lot of weight in the nation of Israel (Philippians 3:4-6). But, he is also a Roman citizen. He has a healthy respect for the Roman authorities that God has put in place, and for the governing structure to which those authorities submit. However, Paul isn’t afraid to hold the Roman leaders to account regarding the rights he enjoys as a citizen of that empire (Acts 16:36-39 & 22:25), and he knows the injustice that lies ahead if those leaders turn him over to the Jewish rulers. He has already made it very clear, prior to his return to Jerusalem, that he doesn’t fear death at their hands, stating earlier that he is “ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 21:13). However, as Acts 23:11 records, he knows that the LORD has determined that he will be going to Rome:

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."

Thus, it is fascinating to see how God is sovereign over all of the events taking place, accomplishing the purposes that He has ordained to come to pass, but uniquely using the person of Paul with all of his past experiences, gifts, and talents to navigate situations that look hand-tailored for him. The same is true for us. God has pre-ordained the situations that his children traverse in this life, uniquely packaging them with the necessary gifts, talents, and personalities used to radiate his glory, pointing others to Christ. All of this is beautifully orchestrated under the leading of the Holy Spirit that dwells within the child of God.

It certainly wouldn't have looked like that in Paul's case when he was being beaten, brought to trial, or left in custody by Felix for two years just to curry favor with the Jews. However, as the Book of Acts and the rest of history plays out, it will become abundantly clear that the LORD was accomplishing a mighty work through his servant Paul.

25:13-27 – ¹³ *Now when some days had passed, Agrippa the king and Bernice arrived at Caesarea and greeted Festus. ¹⁴ And as they stayed there many days, Festus laid Paul's case before the king, saying, "There is a man left prisoner by Felix, ¹⁵ and when I was at Jerusalem, the chief priests and the elders of the Jews laid out their case against him, asking for a sentence of condemnation against him. ¹⁶ I answered them that it was not the custom of the Romans to give up anyone before the accused met the accusers face to face and had opportunity to make his defense concerning the charge laid against him. ¹⁷ So when they came together here, I made no delay, but on the next day took my seat on the tribunal and ordered the man to be brought. ¹⁸ When the accusers stood*

up, they brought no charge in his case of such evils as I supposed. ¹⁹ Rather they had certain points of dispute with him about their own religion and about a certain Jesus, who was dead, but whom Paul asserted to be alive. ²⁰ Being at a loss how to investigate these questions, I asked whether he wanted to go to Jerusalem and be tried there regarding them. ²¹ But when Paul had appealed to be kept in custody for the decision of the emperor, I ordered him to be held until I could send him to Caesar.” ²² Then Agrippa said to Festus, “I would like to hear the man myself.” “Tomorrow,” said he, “you will hear him.”

²³ So on the next day Agrippa and Bernice came with great pomp, and they entered the audience hall with the military tribunes and the prominent men of the city. Then, at the command of Festus, Paul was brought in. ²⁴ And Festus said, “King Agrippa and all who are present with us, you see this man about whom the whole Jewish people petitioned me, both in Jerusalem and here, shouting that he ought not to live any longer. ²⁵ But I found that he had done nothing deserving death. And as he himself appealed to the emperor, I decided to go ahead and send him. ²⁶ But I have nothing definite to write to my lord about him. Therefore I have brought him before you all, and especially before you, King Agrippa, so that, after we have examined him, I may have something to write. ²⁷ For it seems to me unreasonable, in sending a prisoner, not to indicate the charges against him.”

Festus appears to be at a loss as to why Paul was such an agitation to the Jewish authorities. No charges of real significance, in his mind, had ever surfaced. He was only able to conclude that it centered around the resurrection of a man named Jesus, which Paul has already concluded (Acts 23:6). The Jews desperately desire for everyone to believe that Jesus is dead, maintaining the status quo, while Paul is vigorously proclaiming that Jesus is alive. As it turns out, this dispute really points to one conclusion where the Jews and early Christians were in complete harmony: the

importance of the resurrection of Christ. From the outset, immediately following Christ's execution and prior to his resurrection, the Jewish leaders expressed their fear related to this topic in Matthew 27:62-66:

⁶²The next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate ⁶³and said, "Sir, we remember how that impostor said, while he was still alive, 'After three days I will rise.'⁶⁴ Therefore order the tomb to be made secure until the third day, lest his disciples go and steal him away and tell the people, 'He has risen from the dead,' and the last fraud will be worse than the first."⁶⁵ Pilate said to them, "You have a guard of soldiers. Go, make it as secure as you can."⁶⁶ So they went and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone and setting a guard.

Subsequently, when the Jewish leaders are presented with the truth of the empty tomb and its immediate corollary that Christ has risen from the dead as he promised he would, they concoct a lie that disciples had stolen the body (Matthew 28:13). The Jewish leaders know exactly what the truth of the resurrection would do to legitimize the claims that Christ had made during his earthly ministry (he has authority to forgive sins, he is the Son of God, and God will raise him from the dead, just to name a few). Thus, they work diligently to try to cover it up right from the beginning.

Paul also knows the importance of the resurrection with

regard to the claims of Christ stating that it is of “first importance” (1 Corinthians 15:3-4), and going on to reach the hypothetical conclusion that the Christian faith is futile and powerless to cleanse from sin if there is no resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:17). But while Paul is willing to follow the logic of a faulty assumption to prove a point, in the case of the resurrection, he knows the truth; Christ was raised from the dead on the third day proving his testimonies concerning himself. Paul, having met the resurrected Christ (Acts 9), is now willing to go right back into the epicenter of the controversy, testifying on behalf of his Redeemer, spreading the gospel to the very people that rejected him.

And now this essential truth of Christianity is on the big stage. All of these events have worked together to provide Paul with a captive audience of Jewish leaders and high ranking Roman officials—an opportunity that is not lost on Paul. Paul is made for this.

The Main Point

God uniquely uses Paul, with all of his past experiences, gifts, and talents, to navigate situations that are hand-tailored for him. The same is true for every believer. God has pre-ordained the paths his children traverse in this life, using their gifts, talents, and personalities to radiate his glory, pointing others to Christ, all under the direction of the Holy Spirit. The gospel is unchanging, but it is adorned in varied, multi-faceted packages.

A Few Relevant Scriptures

- John 2:18-22 (Jesus predicts his resurrection)
- Matthew 16:21-28 (Jesus predicts his resurrection and refers to himself as the Son of Man)
- Matthew 27:57 – 28:15 (Jewish cover-up of the resurrection)

- Acts 9 (Paul meets the resurrected Savior)
- 1 Corinthians 15 (Paul discusses the importance of the resurrection with regard to the Christian faith)

Week 8

Acts 26:1-32 – Paul Shares His Testimony

By Michael Green

Introduction

If you are like me, you have probably experienced a lot of failure in your life. I can think of a great many times in my life when I've dropped the ball, didn't come through, or even ran away from a challenge instead of hitting it straight on. But, I also have memories of intense victories. In baseball, for example, while I have had my share of strikeouts, I've also tasted what it feels like to hit in the winning run. I've experienced what it's like to hit a ball so pure that you barely feel it and you get to watch it rise and rise until it vanishes over the fence as you slowly trot to first. I've turned in successful projects, killed final exams, and gotten promotions. On a deeper level, for every retreat that I have had with regard to my faith, there are other times when I have stepped out for Christ. There are times where the Spirit of God was leading me and I followed Him as He led, getting to watch him do amazing things when I was willing to offer him my loaves and fishes. In chapter 26 of Acts, we will see that Paul has a captive audience, a moment to be seized. The lights are on, the stage set, and the curtains pulled. It's time for him to address the audience.

Read Acts 26:1-32 together

Weekly Questions

1. What does this passage say about God, who He is, and what He does? (Father, Son, and Spirit)
2. What does this passage teach me about me?
3. What comfort/promise/challenge can I take away from this passage?

4. How will I respond or live differently because of what I've read?

Supplemental Questions

1. What would you consider to be the highest ranking person that you have ever interacted with? What was that situation like?
 2. What would you say if a person with little to no knowledge of Christianity asked you, "Why is the resurrection such a big deal?"
 3. How do we start a conversation about the miracles of our faith with a society that is increasingly secularized, steeped in the idea that the natural world is all there is?
 4. What can we learn from Paul's approach to his defense before King Agrippa that we could apply to our lives?
-

Commentary

26:1-11 - *So Agrippa said to Paul, "You have permission to speak for yourself." Then Paul stretched out his hand and made his defense:*

² *"I consider myself fortunate that it is before you, King Agrippa, I am going to make my defense today against all the accusations of the Jews, ³ especially because you are familiar with all the customs and controversies of the Jews. Therefore I beg you to listen to me patiently.*

⁴ *"My manner of life from my youth, spent from the beginning among my own nation and in Jerusalem, is known by all the Jews. ⁵ They have known for a long time, if they are willing to testify, that according to the strictest party of our religion I have lived as a Pharisee. ⁶ And now I stand here on trial because of my*

hope in the promise made by God to our fathers,⁷ to which our twelve tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly worship night and day. And for this hope I am accused by Jews, O king!⁸ Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?

⁹“I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth.¹⁰ And I did so in Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them.¹¹ And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities.

Paul begins his defense before King Agrippa by establishing the fact that he has the utmost respect for Judaism, rightly understood. He was raised in it, circumscribed by its principles, and encompassed by its way of life. Furthermore, he was a member of its innermost circle, a Pharisee. As a matter of fact, the reason that he is standing before the king is foretold in the very Scriptures that the Jews hold dear. They testify about the Messiah that Paul is proclaiming. They point to the hope of Israel. Daniel, whom they greatly revere, writes about the Son of Man coming on the clouds. Their esteemed Prophet Isaiah is the one that tells of the Suffering Servant that is to become the sacrificial lamb, atoning for sin. Their sacrificial system points to the need for such a lamb, and their Levitical priesthood foreshadows the perfect intercessor to come. Interwoven throughout the fabric of Jewish life from the Scriptures they adore to the festivals they celebrate and the rituals they partake in is a recurrent theme: an anointed one will come and die in order to make atonement for the sins of mankind. Actually the hope of the Jews has Paul in chains. The object of their faith has come, died, and been resurrected. Paul is proclaiming the fulfillment of these truths, and, ironically, the recipients of the promise are his accusers. Prior to his conversion, Paul was zealous for their cause as well, even acting violently on

its behalf.

26:12-23 – *“In this connection I journeyed to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. ¹³ At midday, O king, I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, that shone around me and those who journeyed with me. ¹⁴ And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.’ ¹⁵ And I said, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ And the Lord said, ‘I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. ¹⁶ But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, ¹⁷ delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you ¹⁸ to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.’*

¹⁹ *“Therefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, ²⁰ but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout all the region of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance. ²¹ For this reason the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me. ²² To this day I have had the help that comes from God, and so I stand here testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass: ²³ that the Christ must suffer and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles.”*

Now that Paul has made the case before King Agrippa that he doesn't have animosity toward the Jewish faith but is actually a product of it and a proclaimer of its fulfillment, he begins to discuss his personal migration from being an enemy of Christians to a follower of Christ. Paul was actually on his way to violently

persecute Christians when he met the resurrected Christ on the road to Damascus. Jesus actually came to Paul while Paul was his enemy. Jesus makes that clear when he equates Paul's attacking of Christ's followers to attacking Christ himself. But, the LORD had a purpose for Paul and set his love upon him while he was opposed to him. God had ordained that Paul deliver the Gospel to the Gentiles. He would be a light bearer in this dark world, preaching the forgiveness of sins through faith in Christ, delivering people from Satan's grasp. Through faith in Christ, they would be set apart for the LORD—"a people for his own possession" (1 Peter 2:9), and Paul was to be a herald of this great news.

26:24-32 - ²⁴ *And as he was saying these things in his defense, Festus said with a loud voice, "Paul, you are out of your mind; your great learning is driving you out of your mind."* ²⁵ *But Paul said, "I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking true and rational words. ²⁶ For the king knows about these things, and to him I speak boldly. For I am persuaded that none of these things has escaped his notice, for this has not been done in a corner. 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."*

³⁰ *Then the king rose, and the governor and Bernice and those who were sitting with them. ³¹ And when they had withdrawn, they said to one another, "This man is doing nothing to deserve death or imprisonment."* ³² *And Agrippa said to Festus, "This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar."*

Paul is a respecifier of authority out of respect for the ultimate authority that puts authorities in place, the Lord of

Heaven and Earth; he is not a respecter of persons. In other words, he isn't wrapped up in earthly systems of rank that place greater value on some individuals and lesser value on others. I think that is on display here. He doesn't appear to be intimidated in any way by the audience and sincerely hopes that King Agrippa will put his faith in Christ. But, he goes on to say that he wishes that for all who are in his hearing, not just the person with the highest title that arrived in great pomp (v. 23). Ultimately, Paul has asked for an audience with Caesar, the supreme authority in all of Rome. His request will lead him all the way to Rome, as the LORD has already told him (Acts 23:11).

The Main Point

On a grand stage, before people of great authority, Paul seizes the opportunity afforded him by these false accusations to tell those present about how Jesus took him from being an enemy of Christ to a devout follower, wishing that all within earshot would become what he already is, a child of God.

A Few Relevant Scriptures

- Acts 9:1-19 (Paul's conversion)
- Philippians 3:3-12 (Paul's background prior to being converted)

Week 9

Acts 27:1-28:10 – Shipwrecked

By Aaron Barnes

Introduction

Acts 20:18-24—“And when they came to him, he said to them: ‘You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials...how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable... And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God...”

These are the words of Paul as he leaves the church of Ephesus to continue the ministry. He knows that his life is not about comfort. It is not about accumulating wealth for himself. He knows that his life had been changed by what God has done through Jesus. In this week’s session, Paul and the crew aboard the boat are about to be shipwrecked. Difficulties are a common theme in Paul’s life. However, through these shipwreck moments, God teaches him perseverance and reminds him of his hope in Jesus.

Read Acts 27:1-28:10 together

Weekly Questions

1. What does this passage say about God, who He is, and what He does? (Father, Son, and Spirit)
2. What does this passage teach me about me?

3. What comfort/promise/challenge can I take away from this passage?
4. How will I respond or live differently because of what I've read?

Supplemental Questions

1. As the season of sailing is coming to a close and the crew has not yet made it to their destination, what do you think is going through their minds?
 2. Have you ever asked someone for their opinion, because they had more experience in a particular subject, only to go and do what you wanted to do in the first place...which was opposite of their advice? Did it go well? Feel free to share this with the group.
 3. According to Bible.org, hope is defined this way, "In Scripture, according to the Hebrew and Greek words translated by the word 'hope' and according to the biblical usage, hope is an indication of certainty. 'Hope' in Scripture means 'a strong and confident expectation.' Though archaic today in modern terms, hope is akin to trust and a confident expectation." How does this definition differ from how we typically use it? What does our definition of hope have to say about what we think about God and eternal things?
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Commentary

27:1-12 - *And when it was decided that we should sail for Italy, they delivered Paul and some other prisoners to a centurion of the Augustan Cohort named Julius. ² And embarking in a ship of Adramyttium, which was about to sail to the ports along the coast of Asia, we put to sea, accompanied by Aristarchus, a Macedonian from Thessalonica. ³ The next day we put in at Sidon. And Julius treated Paul kindly and gave him leave to go to his friends and be*

cared for. ⁴ And putting out to sea from there we sailed under the lee of Cyprus, because the winds were against us. ⁵ And when we had sailed across the open sea along the coast of Cilicia and Pamphylia, we came to Myra in Lycia. ⁶ There the centurion found a ship of Alexandria sailing for Italy and put us on board. ⁷ We sailed slowly for a number of days and arrived with difficulty off Cnidus, and as the wind did not allow us to go farther, we sailed under the lee of Crete off Salmone. ⁸ Coasting along it with difficulty, we came to a place called Fair Havens, near which was the city of Lasea.

⁹ Since much time had passed, and the voyage was now dangerous because even the Fast was already over, Paul advised them, ¹⁰ saying, "Sirs, I perceive that the voyage will be with injury and much loss, not only of the cargo and the ship, but also of our lives." ¹¹ But the centurion paid more attention to the pilot and to the owner of the ship than to what Paul said. ¹² And because the harbor was not suitable to spend the winter in, the majority decided to put out to sea from there, on the chance that somehow they could reach Phoenix, a harbor of Crete, facing both southwest and northwest, and spend the winter there.

Paul's current situation contributes to the theme of his life in general. The winds are against him, it seems, in more ways than one. But any able-bodied individual can sail when the conditions are in perfect alignment. Only the fearless individuals, those that have a higher calling, are able to brave the storms of life in order to venture out into the unknown. Paul had a great upbringing. He was taught by some of the best teachers. He was a Roman citizen. However, all of these divine providences from the Lord do not remove Paul from any of the hardships in life that he encounters. Throughout his trials and tribulations, one thing is most important to Paul. Whether he is stoned or beaten, imprisoned or persecuted Paul keeps the gospel of Jesus at the front of

everything. He responds in a manner that leads to God receiving glory. Most people can respond favorably when things are going according to schedule. The question is what will we do when the “winds are against” us?

27:13-26 – *Now when the south wind blew gently, supposing that they had obtained their purpose, they weighed anchor and sailed along Crete, close to the shore. ¹⁴ But soon a tempestuous wind, called the northeaster, struck down from the land. ¹⁵ And when the ship was caught and could not face the wind, we gave way to it and were driven along. ¹⁶ Running under the lee of a small island called Cauda, we managed with difficulty to secure the ship’s boat. ¹⁷ After hoisting it up, they used supports to undergird the ship. Then, fearing that they would run aground on the Syrtis, they lowered the gear, and thus they were driven along. ¹⁸ Since we were violently storm-tossed, they began the next day to jettison the cargo. ¹⁹ And on the third day they threw the ship’s tackle overboard with their own hands. ²⁰ When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small tempest lay on us, all hope of our being saved was at last abandoned.*

²¹ Since they had been without food for a long time, Paul stood up among them and said, “Men, you should have listened to me and not have set sail from Crete and incurred this injury and loss. ²² Yet now I urge you to take heart, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. ²³ For this very night there stood before me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship, ²⁴ and he said, ‘Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar. And behold, God has granted you all those who sail with you.’ ²⁵ So take heart, men, for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told. ²⁶ But we must run aground on some island.”

At this point in history, sailors relied upon celestial guidance. They used star placement, moon phase, and the angle

of the sun to know direction and seasons while at sea. If those objects were not visible, anxiety ran high on the open waters. After days of being tossed to and fro, doing what they can to survive along with what is left of the ship and its crew, they now turn to tossing the cargo overboard in hopes that lightening the load will allow for a safer arrival at port. However, the situation is about to take a turn for the worse.

The New American Commentary points out that this stormy scene is reminiscent of that stormy night with God's prophet to the Assyrians, Jonah. In Jonah's situation, the cargo is tossed overboard and the ship is as prepared as possible, but it will soon go down if something doesn't change. They are in despair. They are hopeless. Jonah shares that the crew is in danger because of his disobedience. The only solution is to toss him overboard with the cargo. Only then will the storm cease. This is where the Jonah vs. Paul comparison falls apart. In the Jonah event, "It was Jonah's presence on the ship that gave rise to the storm and only in his absence were the others saved." In the Paul event, it is "his presence on the ship that led to the deliverance" of those on board. In fateful times, we are commanded to remain faithful despite the storms that rage around us. God's presence is what we need.

At this point, Paul points out that he voted against sailing on and that the others should have heeded his advice. Quick question...has this ever happened to you? Have you ever tried your hand at sailing against the winds? Maybe you know what you should or should not do. You even ask your friends and those who have gone before you, and even in light of the advice you receive, you decide that you are going to do what you want to do. You choose to act against your better judgment and end up fighting a losing battle. Sound familiar? I am not saying that God was not at any point orchestrating or allowing these things to take place in order for Paul to arrive safely in the presence of Caesar. However, I am saying that God has given us minds to think and reason and

using these we can often avoid unnecessary difficulties. Could it be that we experience unnecessary trials because we are too hasty with our decisions or are prideful in our decision-making?

27:27-44 - *When the fourteenth night had come, as we were being driven across the Adriatic Sea, about midnight the sailors suspected that they were nearing land. ²⁸ So they took a sounding and found twenty fathoms. A little farther on they took a sounding again and found fifteen fathoms. ²⁹ And fearing that we might run on the rocks, they let down four anchors from the stern and prayed for day to come. ³⁰ And as the sailors were seeking to escape from the ship, and had lowered the ship's boat into the sea under pretense of laying out anchors from the bow, ³¹ Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, "Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved." ³² Then the soldiers cut away the ropes of the ship's boat and let it go.*

³³ *As day was about to dawn, Paul urged them all to take some food, saying, "Today is the fourteenth day that you have continued in suspense and without food, having taken nothing.*

³⁴ *Therefore I urge you to take some food. For it will give you strength, for not a hair is to perish from the head of any of you."*

³⁵ *And when he had said these things, he took bread, and giving thanks to God in the presence of all he broke it and began to eat.*

³⁶ *Then they all were encouraged and ate some food themselves.*

³⁷ *(We were in all 276 persons in the ship.) ³⁸ And when they had eaten enough, they lightened the ship, throwing out the wheat into the sea.*

³⁹ *Now when it was day, they did not recognize the land, but they noticed a bay with a beach, on which they planned if possible to run the ship ashore. ⁴⁰ So they cast off the anchors and left them in the sea, at the same time loosening the ropes that tied the rudders. Then hoisting the foresail to the wind they made for the beach. ⁴¹ But striking a reef, they ran the vessel aground. The bow stuck and remained immovable, and the stern was being*

broken up by the surf. ⁴² The soldiers' plan was to kill the prisoners, lest any should swim away and escape. ⁴³ But the centurion, wishing to save Paul, kept them from carrying out their plan. He ordered those who could swim to jump overboard first and make for the land, ⁴⁴ and the rest on planks or on pieces of the ship. And so it was that all were brought safely to land.

According to the message Paul receives from the angel, the ship is destined to go down, but the men will be saved. Before the wreck takes place, Paul takes the opportunity to put God on display by giving him thanks and pointing to him as the protector and sustainer. God promises that none of them will be harmed. And much like we have seen in the previous chapters in Acts, God's divine purpose is carried out despite the seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

Paul's encouraging and reassuring message is delivered in one of the most perilous times. The boat is literally about to sink. The storms rage. The crew is afraid. In that moment God uses Paul to deliver a message of hope. Being infinite in power and wisdom, and being outside of the constraints of time, God is always in control. His divine purpose will be carried out. The gospel will go forth. Let us be a people that stand up and speak out in the midst of perilous times. May we stand up in front of those who have not yet received God's redemption and speak out to those who have not yet heard the gospel.

28:1-10 – *After we were brought safely through, we then learned that the island was called Malta. ² The native people showed us unusual kindness, for they kindled a fire and welcomed us all, because it had begun to rain and was cold. ³ When Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks and put them on the fire, a viper came out because of the heat and fastened on his hand. ⁴ When the native people saw the creature hanging from his hand, they said to one another, "No doubt this man is a murderer. Though he has*

escaped from the sea, Justice has not allowed him to live.”⁵ He, however, shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm.⁶ They were waiting for him to swell up or suddenly fall down dead. But when they had waited a long time and saw no misfortune come to him, they changed their minds and said that he was a god.

⁷ Now in the neighborhood of that place were lands belonging to the chief man of the island, named Publius, who received us and entertained us hospitably for three days.⁸ It happened that the father of Publius lay sick with fever and dysentery. And Paul visited him and prayed, and putting his hands on him, healed him.⁹ And when this had taken place, the rest of the people on the island who had diseases also came and were cured.¹⁰ They also honored us greatly, and when we were about to sail, they put on board whatever we needed.

First, no one listens to Paul’s advice about the sailing weather. Next, they are going to kill all of the prisoners...including Paul. Then, they are shipwrecked. To top it all off, Paul is bitten by a snake while attempting to get warm and dry off by the fire. What kind of protection is taking place? Didn’t God say that he would take care of Paul? Yes, along with those aboard the ship. However, our plans are not God’s plans. They include Paul making it to the room with Caesar in Rome. He does not allow Paul to die by a snake bite. Why is this significant for us to see? Because we tend to throw in the towel as soon as life becomes difficult. As soon as we sense that things are not going our way, we begin to question the goodness of God. Much like the Hebrew people do as God provides for them every step of the way from Egypt through the wilderness to Canaan. They are thirsty, and God gives them water from a rock. They are hungry, so God gives them manna and quail. Each step of the way, God provides. But they still complain because life is difficult. God provides in ways that they don’t even realize. Moses reminds them in Deuteronomy

29:5 that even their shoes did not wear out when they were in the wilderness for forty years. Could it be that we are, at times, all too eager to give up? Could it be that we are not much different from the Hebrew children?

God keeps Paul and the crew alive. Is it easy for them? Most certainly not! However, God keeps his promise. He always keeps his promise. Through the shipwreck and the snake bite, those around Paul are able to see the hope that he has in God through Jesus. After Paul is healed from the snake bite, the father of the chief of the island becomes sick. Because the people have seen how Paul reacted to the circumstances around him, Paul is able to pray for and heal the sick man. This leads to many people on the island being healed. Once again Paul's reaction to his circumstances puts God on display. As we struggle in life and we face tough times, let us remember the hope that we have in the gospel of Jesus. God never promises us ease in life, but he does promise us eternal life full of abundant hope that comes through knowing Jesus Christ.

The Main Point

Everyone struggles. Everyone experiences difficulties in life. As believers, let us remember that there is confidence in this uncertain world for those who know Jesus. That confidence is the hope of Jesus.

A Few Relevant Scriptures

Old Testament Passages

- Jonah
- Deuteronomy 8, 29:5

Week 10

Acts 28:11-31 – Salvation for the Gentiles

By Aaron Barnes

Introduction

I love to read about the time Jesus calls Matthew out of his life as a tax collector and into a life of making disciples. Here it is in Matthew 9:9-13:

“As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he rose and followed him.

And as Jesus reclined at table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were reclining with Jesus and his disciples. And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” But when he heard it, he said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.’ For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.”

Can't you just see it?! Excited that he has just found the living hope that he has waited for, Matthew invites Jesus to come to his house. He is going to throw a party and invites all of his tax collecting buddies to hear how they too can find hope and peace in a life full of despair and discord. Jesus comes in with his disciples. They sit and eat. And then it happens. Someone chimes in with their disapproval. They cannot believe that this Rabbi, this Teacher, would ever be sitting in the house of a no-good tax collector. And Jesus gives them grace through words of wisdom. If you're not sick, why would you go to the doctor? You wouldn't.

I love to read that. But I am not the best at actually living that out. If we are to live as Jesus lived and approach the ones he

approached, then we are to seek out the marginalized: the homeless, the widowed, the orphaned, the ones that are defiantly against anything that Jesus stands for. The reality is that we are all broken. Jesus has come to heal those who recognize their need. He shares the good news and calls us to do the same. That's what we see Paul doing.

Read Acts 28:11-31 together

Weekly Questions

1. What does this passage say about God, who He is, and what He does? (Father, Son, and Spirit)
2. What does this passage teach me about me?
3. What comfort/promise/challenge can I take away from this passage?
4. How will I respond or live differently because of what I've read?

Supplemental Questions

1. When was the last time someone encouraged you when you needed it most? How did that make you feel about them?
 2. When was the last time you encouraged someone without being prompted to do so?
 3. What would it take for us to become a faith family that lived to love those that do not follow Jesus? Personally? As a church? What would this look like?
 4. What's holding you back from sharing your faith this week?
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Commentary

28:11-16 – *After three months we set sail in a ship that had*

wintered in the island, a ship of Alexandria, with the twin gods as a figurehead. ¹² Putting in at Syracuse, we stayed there for three days. ¹³ And from there we made a circuit and arrived at Rhegium. And after one day a south wind sprang up, and on the second day we came to Puteoli. ¹⁴ There we found brothers and were invited to stay with them for seven days. And so we came to Rome. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ And when we came into Rome, Paul was allowed to stay by himself, with the soldier who guarded him.

The fact that they find “brothers” in Rome is significant. The distance from Rome to Puteoli is 130 miles and five days on foot. It appears from the text that they make the trip in order to encourage Paul. This is why they ask Paul and the others to stay with them that week. What a great scene we have here. The church is coming out to encourage one of their own. In a moment that Paul can use some encouragement, God shows up by way of his church. Never underestimate the power of an encouraging word to another person. It may be just what they need to hear in a moment of weakness.

28:17-31 – *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. ¹⁸ When they had examined me, they wished to set me at liberty, because there was no reason for the death penalty in my case. ¹⁹ But because the Jews objected, I was compelled to appeal to Caesar—though I had no charge to bring against my nation. ²⁰ 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.” ²¹ 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. 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.”

²³ 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. ²⁴ And some were convinced by what he said, but others disbelieved. ²⁵ 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:

²⁶ “ ‘Go to this people, and say,
“You will indeed hear but never understand,
and you will indeed see but never perceive.”

²⁷ 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.’

²⁸ Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.”

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.

As per usual, Paul begins his witness with an audience of Jewish leaders. He goes to them in order that they may know he is innocent of any charges brought against him and that he has done

nothing illegal or against Jewish teaching. He shares with them his story of how he has come to Rome and why that is important for them. It is important because they need to hear of the hope of Jesus Christ. Through his resurrection, all men everywhere can be redeemed. Following this conversation, the Jewish leaders set up another time to continue the conversation with Paul. By this time, Paul has been placed in a rented home by himself to live out the rest of his days. When the Jewish leaders come back the next time, he preaches to them and shares about Jesus. He proves to them through the writings of Moses and the Prophets that Jesus is the Messiah that they have been waiting for and he was also resurrected. Some of the leaders believe. As you can probably imagine, this leads to division among the Jewish leaders. Sensing the division, and possibly even seeing and hearing them disagree among themselves, Paul speaks to them from Isaiah 6. The Holy Spirit inspires Paul to speak to the Jewish leaders from this passage because this was the reason that Jesus came and for Paul's mission. The mission is to seek and save the lost. The Jews have had all the teaching and all the learning. All of the Scriptures point to Jesus as the Messiah, but the Jews have missed the point. Paul is now turning to the Gentiles.

The last two verses are significant and show us more of the character of Paul. Because of how Paul has typically responded to the trials around him and the way that he has interacted with the rulers in every city and town, he has been granted more liberty. Verse 31 says that he preaches with all boldness, and he is unhindered. This means that no one stepped in to detract from the message that Paul is preaching. Many times we are not granted a hearing by people because we have not won their respect. Throughout Paul's ministry, his travels across land and sea, and even through his persecution, Paul leads with the love of Christ. He even says that the love of Christ compels him to speak and to minister to others (2 Corinthians 5:11-14). Let us be a people that work to love the way Jesus loves so that we may be

able to share with others the gospel that Jesus gave us to share. Let us truly know Jesus and make him known!

The Main Point

It does not matter where you are from and what you have been through, Jesus came to DO for us all what we could never do for ourselves. He fulfilled the law. Jesus came to BE for us what we could never be for ourselves. He was the perfect sacrifice. He came to seek and to save the lost. This means that salvation is for any who will turn in faith to Jesus.

A Few Relevant Scriptures

New Testament Passages

- Matthew 9
- 2 Corinthians 5
- John 3, 10:7-18

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