

The Unhindered Gospel

Acts 28:17-31

In the early years of our marriage, Cindy and I got on an Alfred Hitchcock movie kick. There was a season of time whenever we'd go to Blockbuster, we would rent an Hitchcock movie. [Yes, young people, you used to have to physically go to a store to rent a movie! Ask your parents about it.] *North by Northwest. Rear Window. To Catch a Thief. Vertigo.* We watched a lot of them. We also watched *The Birds*.

It's a movie about people in a small town trying to avoid swarms of birds that begin attacking for an unknown reason. At the end, the main characters are barricaded inside a house that is being attacked by birds trying to break in throughout the night. When one of the characters goes up to explore a sound coming from upstairs, she finds that the birds have broken through the roof, and she is attacked. She ends up being rescued, but is in bad shape.

The next morning as Mitch (one of the main characters) prepares a car to drive the injured woman to San Francisco the birds (spoiler alert) have stopped attacking. As the characters slowly walk out of the house to the car the birds are everywhere – covering the ground, sitting on the house, the rail, and the wires. The movie ends as the four characters drive away with the birds ominously watching them. That's it! That's the ending!

The ending leaves you with a sense of suspense because you don't know what's going to happen. Is it over? Will the birds attack again? Will the characters survive? It is an ending that leaves you pondering what's going to happen next.

Today as we wrap up the book of Acts, Luke has an ending that leaves us pondering what's next. As we come to Acts 28, Paul is finally in Rome. Over the past eight chapters, Luke has described the events that led to Paul being in Rome and now he's there. Nearly a third of Acts is focused on these events! Surely Luke is building to an ending with Paul heroically preaching the gospel before Caesar, right? That seems like the perfect, epic ending to all of this! But that's not what Luke does. Let's take a look.

In verse 16, Luke tells us that once in Rome, Paul is allowed to stay in a private dwelling, but is guarded by a Roman soldier because he is under house arrest. Luke wants us to think about how Paul, the prisoner, spends his time in Rome. He spends time doing what he always does . . . preaching the good news. Let's look at Paul's evangelistic outreach while under house arrest.

Evangelistic Outreach While Under House Arrest (vv. 17-28)

In this passage we read of two meetings with the Jewish leaders. In **the first meeting**, Paul wants them to understand the nature of his legal situation.

¹⁷ 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.

Paul calls for the local Jewish leaders to come to him. He continues his pattern of speaking to the Jews first when he comes to a new city. Typically, he would go to them in the synagogue, but that is not possible here since here he is under house arrest.

Paul declares that he *had done nothing against our people or the customs of our father*. And yet despite this he was *delivered as a prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans*. This of course is referring to his arrest in the temple that we looked at a few weeks ago. He goes on.

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.

At every point as Paul is examined by the Romans, they had found him innocent. The tribunal, Felix, Festus, Agrippa, all found him innocent. But because the Jews objected so strongly to Paul being set free, he had no choice but to *appeal to Caesar*. That's why he is now in Rome. But Paul wants to assure these leaders that in appealing to Caesar, he is not bringing a charge against them.

You can imagine that these Jewish leaders might be concerned that Paul is going to bring some kind of charge that would put them in a difficult spot with the Romans who not all that many years earlier had expelled all the Jews from the Rome under Claudius' reign. But he makes clear that he is not bringing a charge against them. He is simply seeking to clear his name.

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."

Paul assumes that the Jews in Rome have heard reports about him. But in verse 21 the leaders state that they had not heard any reports about Paul. Most commentators note that this seems strange that they hadn't heard anything. Surely the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem would have sent letters explaining their case against Paul. But maybe they didn't because they knew they truly had no case against Paul. Or maybe the letters simply had not arrived yet after travel being shut down over the winter. We don't know.

At this point the first meeting ends. Things are cordial. Paul declares his innocence. He assures the Jewish leaders that he is not in Rome seeking to cause trouble for the Jews with Rome. The Jewish leaders depart expressing that they want to *hear from [Paul] what [his] views are* about Christianity, which they call a *sect* that *everywhere* is *spoken against*. Again, this is a little strange that they seem to know little about Christianity because there was a significant Christian community in Rome.

Some days later there is a **second meeting**. In this meeting, Paul doesn't talk about his legal status; he talks about the kingdom of God and proclaims the message of Christ.

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.

Apparently, those who first met with Paul spread the word and others come. Obviously, Paul was glad for the opportunity to speak to as many of the Jews as possible. His heart always was that his fellow Jews would come to believe in Jesus.

Paul spoke about *the kingdom of God*. The kingdom of God is where God is reigning and ruling. The Jewish people had long anticipated God's special reign over the world to be fulfilled with the coming of the Messiah (e.g., Dan. 2:44). In Paul's day many believed that this kingdom would be established through political and military means. But as we know, Jesus ushered it in in a very different way. He did it through humility. He did it by coming as a servant to suffer and die. Paul testifies about this.

He also tries to *convince them about Jesus* – that He is the fulfillment of their hopes. He is Israel's promised Messiah. Paul tries to persuade them of this by speaking from both *the Law of Moses and from the Prophets*. That would have been an amazing sermon to hear, right?

As has been the case everywhere Paul has preached, there were different responses.

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:

These Jewish leaders end up in different places regarding what Paul taught and as a result it creates disagreement. Ultimately, they left after Paul proclaims a kind of judgment on the unbelieving Jews. In verses 26 and 27, Paul quotes Isaiah 6:9-10. He applies what the Spirit had to say to the Jewish people of Isaiah's day to the Jews of Paul's day. The Jews of Isaiah's day rejected the message that Isaiah proclaimed. They heard, but never understood. They saw but didn't perceive. In refusing to listen to God, their hearts grew *dull*. Their ears could *barely hear*. Their eyes *closed*.

Paul is suggesting to those gathered with him that a similar thing is happening in his day. And they should hear the warning. If they continue to reject God's message, which Paul preached, if they refuse to listen, if they continue to reject God's call to repent, they are in danger of having their hearts become hardened and not be able to respond spiritually.

It was this word that led to their departure. But before they leave, Paul says this,

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

The point is that since *they will listen*, they will respond. They will repent and believe. And that is exactly what had been happening as Paul took the message of the Gospel from city to city.

And so, shortly after arriving in Rome after a long and eventful trip, under house arrest, likely chained to a guard, what do we find Paul doing? He is busy with evangelistic outreach. He proclaims Jesus and speaks about the kingdom. He does what God has called him to do even in chains.

Now, as we come to the final two verses in Acts, Luke gives the last of several progress reports. In this final progress report, Luke declares that the Gospel is unhindered.

Luke's Final Summary Statement: An Unhindered Gospel (vv. 30-31)

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

Paul spent two years living in confinement awaiting his appearance before Caesar! During this time Paul *welcomed all who came to him*. Likely both Jews and Gentiles came to him. And as they came, Paul proclaimed *the kingdom of God* and he taught *about the Lord Jesus Christ*.

Paul did this *with all boldness and without hindrance*. He's under house arrest. He's in chains. And yet the gospel is not chained. Luke wants us to understand that nothing can stop the gospel. Not Rome. Not the Jewish leaders. Not prison. Nothing! It continues to go forth.

This was a fruitful time of ministry for Paul. It was during this time that Paul wrote his letters to the Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and to Philemon. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul stated that this time under house arrest in Rome "served to advance the gospel" (Phil. 1:12).

Now, as you back up and think about this ending, it's abrupt, right? Luke leaves so many loose ends. He has spent eight chapters talking the events of Paul getting to Rome, but now he doesn't tell us what ultimately happens to Paul!? Did he go to trial? Did he stand before Caesar? Was he released? Was he executed? What happened to Paul? He doesn't tell us!

Many commentators believe that Paul was released from this imprisonment and continued his ministry for a few years before being rearrested. His letter, 2 Timothy, seems to be written during a later imprisonment and many believe he was eventually executed at the end of this second imprisonment. But Luke doesn't tell us because his objective has never been to give us a biography of Paul. Rather, he has been describing how the Gospel has spread. That's the point.

This abrupt ending was not a mistake. Luke didn't run out of parchment. He didn't forget about what happened to Paul. It just isn't his point. Luke doesn't want our focus on Paul; he wants it on the spread of the Gospel. He wants us to ponder not what happens to Paul, but what will happen next with the Gospel. That's the reason for this abrupt ending.

Now, as we think about this ending, there are a couple of take aways for us. First, Luke's ending communicates that **The Gospel is Unhindered**. Luke flat out tells us this. *Unhindered* is the last word in the original language. And what Luke explicitly says in this last verse, he has been demonstrating throughout Acts. At no point has opposition stopped the spread of the gospel. Over and over the Jewish leaders tried to stop this movement. Stephen was martyred. Peter and others were thrown in jail. Paul and his co-workers experience severe opposition in city after city. Paul is now in prison. But the gospel has marched forward. Against incredible opposition it has spread from a small group of believers in Jerusalem, to countless believers in Asia and in Europe, and it has now come to Rome, the most powerful city in the world at the time. The Gospel is unhindered.

As Christians living in the United States during a time when we are rapidly losing cultural power and social influence, we need to hear Luke's message. We so easily lament what we are losing. We are so concerned for all the ways we are marginalized. And we think that unless we hold onto power and regain our central place in society that it means the gospel will be silenced.

But Luke has demonstrated in Acts that a small group of believers though marginalized, and without cultural power or social influence, and who faced incredible opposition, changed their world. As they remained loyal to Jesus, as they prayed and walked in the power of the Spirit, the Gospel continued to advance. I believe Luke wants us to move into the future with hope! I believe Luke wants us to trust that what God started with a small band of believers in Jerusalem, and which spread against all kinds of opposition, to the heart of the Roman Empire continues today, because the Gospel is unhindered.

The second thing Luke's ending points us to is to consider is that now **It is Our Turn**. The abrupt ending leads us to ask, "What's next? What is my role?" Luke wants us to understand that not only is the Gospel unhindered, the spread of the Gospel is unfinished.

Yes, the Gospel has come to very heart of the Roman Empire. This will be important for the continued spread of the Gospel. But here's the thing, Rome was not the "end of the earth" that Jesus talked about in Acts 1:8 when he said:

⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

Luke's readers would have known that Rome was not the "end of the earth," and as a result they would have understood that there is work yet to be done. The ending of Acts is not the

end of the story, it's about the opening to the rest of the story. I believe Luke wants us to ask, "What's my part now?" "How will I join in the spread of the gospel?" How will we? How will I?

Obviously, there are all kinds of things that we can do to take action on this point. If you've been through Rooted, you have learned about the BLESS model, which is a practical way to be engaged in the spread of the Gospel. **BLESS. B - We Begin by praying** for people. **L - We Listen** to people. In other words, we seek to enter into conversations with people. **E - We Eat** with people. We grab coffee with them. We offer hospitality. **S - We seek to Serve** people. And finally, **S - We look for opportunities to Share** our story of faith in Jesus.

In terms of beginning with prayer, let me give you one specific way to pray that relates to the time of year. Advent starts next Sunday. What if during Advent this year, knowing that it is now your turn, you begin to ask God this question, "God, is there someone that you want me to invite to our Christmas services?"

I'm not saying, you must invite someone. I'm not saying write down five people and then go invite them. I'm saying, just begin to ask God this question. Is it possible that there is someone in whom God is at work drawing them to Himself? It is possible that the Spirit is doing something in a person around you and that your simple invite to a Christmas service, where they will hear the Gospel, will change their eternity?

Begin asking God this question. Keep asking Him this question. If He doesn't place someone on your heart, no worries. Don't feel any guilt about not inviting someone. But if He does place someone on your heart, pray for that person and look for the right opportunity to invite them. We would encourage you to grab one of the invite cards so that you are ready if God does put someone on your heart to invite. And if He does, pray, trust the Spirit, and look for an opportunity to invite them.

Here's how it might look. Let's say you are talking with your neighbor, co-worker, or classmate and at some point you could simply ask, "Sam, do you ever go to church at Christmas?" If he says he has plans to go, great. Ask him about it. But if he says, "We did growing up," or "No, not really," you can simply follow up with, "Would you like to join me this Christmas Eve?" Even if he says no, it may open up an opportunity to have a spiritual conversation then or in the future. This is just one simple way to live out the truth that now it is our turn.

Bottom line, we believe that Luke is wanting us to know that God is still at work. We are still on mission. The unhindered gospel is still going forward. And we are part of it!

We named this sermon series, *Loyal to Jesus*. In Acts, we've seen how the early disciples walked this out. The challenge to all of us is to continue to walk as disciples who are loyal to Jesus. The story that Luke has told us in the book of Acts, and finished with this this finely crafted ending tells us that one critical way that we are to be loyal to Jesus is to continue the work he started. To continue to spread the good news of a kingdom that has come, and of a Savior who makes it possible for anyone to know God.