

# The End of the Journey?

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 13 April 2025

Preacher: Adrian Reynolds

[ 0 : 0 0 ] Well, thank you very much for having me. I do enjoy getting out and about and being here.! I can't say for lunch, I'm afraid. I'm in the music team for our church, which meets at three! o'clock. So I've got to be back for three! o'clock. I'm going to be playing my guitar, which comes from Farnham. I just thought I'd tell you that. Is the music shop still in the code? Is it called Coda or something like that? I can't remember what it's called. Still there?

There we go. I shall think of you this afternoon as I'm playing my Farnham Surrey guitar. Well, let's have our Bibles open. If you've got a Bible or a device, turn it on. It's useful to have it open in front of you at the passage that was read. We're concentrating really on verses 11 through to the end of the chapter. And with our Bibles open, let me pray.

We praise you, Heavenly Father, for your word. Thank you, Spirit, for inspiring these words to be written down and in your providence for preserving them for us and providing them for us in a language we can read. And thank you they tell us about the gospel of Jesus.

They lift him up before us. They exalt him before us. And we pray that as we look at this passage, we will see Jesus and what it means to love, serve, and follow him in his name. Amen.

Amen. I wonder if you've ever been on a really long journey and you've got that feeling when you're just relieved to get to the end of it. You know that feeling? It always amazes me that you sit for six hours in the car and you come to the end of your journey. What do you want to do?

[ 1 : 3 5 ] You just want to sit. You know, sit somewhere slightly more comfortable, perhaps. I've been in Inverness this week, in fact, a bit north of Inverness. It's a long, long way. And it's just a relief to get home. It's a relief to get to the end of a journey. And you've got to the end of a journey in Acts. And perhaps you feel a sense of relief. I don't know. Don't admit that, obviously.

But perhaps you feel you're ready for the next thing. Or perhaps you're excited and you wish there was a bit more. Well, there is a little bit more, as we shall see today. And it's the end of the journey, too, for Paul. And for Paul, it's been a long, eventful journey, hasn't it? We had a little hint of that, even in those first few verses from chapter 28. And though it's the end of the journey, it's not the end of the story. It's important to know that. How did it begin? Well, it began back in Acts chapter 1 with Jesus commissioning his followers. This is what he said to them. You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth. And right from the start, the ends of the earth included Rome. So just a page over, if you remember back, I don't know how long ago this was now for you in your series, but the Pentecost sermon, just before that, when the Holy Spirit comes on all Jesus' followers. Remember, there are people from all over the world who are gathered there for the festival, and they hear the gospel being spoken in their own languages. Utterly amazed, chapter 2, verse 7, they asked, aren't all those who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? And then here they are listed, Parthians, Medes, Elamites, residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt, and the parts of Libya near Cyrene, visitors from Rome. In a sense, Acts begins with people from Rome, and it ends in Rome. And Acts has been the story of the spread of this good news about Jesus. First through, really, the work of the apostle Peter, to Jewish people largely, and then as Peter received a vision, that gospel spread to Gentiles, and Paul was remarkably transformed, wasn't he, converted to become the apostle to the Gentiles, and to the ends of the earth. And I think we're supposed to see Rome as being the ends of the earth. Now, if you looked on a map, you wouldn't think it's as far away from the Pentecost location as it could be, and of course it isn't. But Rome was the centre of the earth. Rome was the centre of the known world. Rome was where the empire was managed and ruled from.

And so for the gospel to reach Rome, it was reaching the ends of the earth. Acts, then, is the story of that spread, and everything has been building to this moment.

[ 4 : 54 ] And so really, in many ways, the summary is at the end of verse 14. And so we came to Rome. And so we came to Rome. But it's not the end of the story. You notice that Acts 28 is silent on some things that we know happened. We know that Paul was under arrest. We know that he was in Rome to be tried. And we also know from history that he was executed there. Do you notice the trial of Paul in Rome? It's not there, is it? Do you notice the execution of Paul in Rome? It's not there, is it?

And I think it's because of this. Luke, who's a very careful author, he wrote the book of Luke, that we call Luke. He also wrote Acts. He's very careful about the stories that he includes and the details that he gives. And I think he wants us to know this today, that though it's the end of Paul's journey, it's not the end of the gospel. It's not the end of the story of the good news of Jesus who died and Jesus who rose again and Jesus who is one day returning.

You probably know this, there's a church planting movement which is very cleverly called Acts 29, as in the next bit. And though they have the name, they don't have a monopoly on the idea. Because we are Acts chapter 29 and Acts chapter 30 and Acts chapter 31. And since AD 60, which is probably when this is, not even 30 years after Jesus' death, since AD 60, the gospel has continued growing. It has continued going to the ends of the earth. And you might not feel like it this morning, but you are proof of that. The gospel has even reached Surrey. Here it is. The gospel has continued growing all around the world. And even today, Paul writes to the Colossians, the gospel is growing and bearing fruit all over the world. So what does Dr. Luke, the very careful author, want us to see as we draw this story to a close? I want to show you three things from this passage. There's lots more.

It's a fascinating story. There's lots of detail, lots of things we could go into. But perhaps three big things to see. Firstly, this, nothing can stop the spread of the gospel. Nothing can stop the spread of the gospel. And this really is, in a sense, it's verses 11 to 16. But actually, it's really chapters 1 through to chapter 28, verse 16. Everything seems to have been against the apostles. All sorts of different trouble. And yet nothing can stop the spread of the gospel. I wonder, I asked you earlier on about if you've ever been on a long journey. What's the most difficult journey you've ever been on? Perhaps you've been caught up in one of those airport calamities when you've been on holiday or a train strike. I once went to India to teach at a college. And it's quite a long flight. It's not a very long way. I realise it's not like flying to Australia. But it's quite a long way. And the person I was with said to me, we'd like to go up into the foothills of the Himalayas to do some teaching of some rural pastors. I said, oh, that's exciting. He said, then once you've landed, we'll wait an hour, just get a cup of tea and we'll set off. I said, oh, OK. I wasn't overly keen on the idea.

[ 8 : 44 ] You know, I just wanted to sit and rest after my flight. I said, well, how far is it? He said, well, it's about a four-hour drive. So I looked at the map. It didn't look like a four-hour drive. I said, are you sure it's a four-hour drive? He said, oh, yeah, four hours will do it. Well, we landed and he handed me the car keys. He said, we're going in two cars. You drive one. I'll drive the other. Well, it was a 12-hour car drive and nothing had quite prepared me for driving on a, well, some of it was on a dual carriageway, but driving along a dual carriageway on the left, drive on the left in India, and having two buses coming towards me on my side of the road on the two different lanes and got round them and there was an elephant. Suffice it to say, it was quite a remarkable journey. And when I got to the end, I just wanted to live in that place, Missouri, for the rest of my life and never leave it. But it's nothing compared to what Paul has been through. However difficult a journey you've had, I doubt you've had something quite like his. So just in the last few chapters, which is just the last few months, really, of his life, imprisonment, trial, imprisonment again, another trial, storm, shipwreck, abandonment almost, snakes. The journey should have taken five weeks and has taken four months. That's more than a train strike, isn't it? So I think Paul wins the prize, hands down. But he wanted to get to Rome and here he is. Everything seems to have been against him.

Everything seems to have gone wrong for him. If you were planning the story of a hero, all this stuff would have been, you'd never have put it in the plot. And yet God has been in it all.

He's not here, by the way, because of the gods, Castor and Pollux. You see them in verse 11. They're kind of good luck gods, really, I suppose you might call them. You know, put them on the front of your ship. Those ancient superstitious people might think you'd be all right. He's not there because of them. I think Luke includes that detail because he's just kind of giving you a little wink

and saying, you know that Paul's not there because of them, right? He's there because the Holy Spirit, the one who came down in power, has been behind it all. All part of his plan. And amazingly, when he arrives in Rome, he discovers Christians already there. Verse 14, there we found some brothers and sisters, possibly who can date their lineage back to those moments almost 30 years ago in Pentecost. Maybe it was their mum and dads who were there. Maybe they were there themselves. Maybe they knew someone who was there. Somehow, the gospel is there. People are very happy to see Paul. The brothers and sisters had heard, verse 15, that they were coming. They travelled as far as the Forum of Appius and the Three Taverns. [ 11 : 49 ] And just in case these are places you don't know particularly well, they're quite a distance. 30 miles, 30 miles, the Forum of Appius, 40 miles, the Three Taverns. They'd heard about Paul and they wanted to meet him. And at the sight of these people, Paul thanked God and was encouraged.

Paul knew, you see, that nothing can stop the spread of the gospel. He wanted to get to Rome. He wanted to preach the gospel there. And when he arrives, he finds believers there already. God has gone before him. Literally before him. Paul, the brave apostle, the incredible preacher, soldier for the Lord, he was encouraged by the spread of the gospel. Nothing has stopped it. Friends, I'm sure you know this, but just in case you don't, let me remind you that the advance of the gospel is rarely straightforward. I don't know, you'll have to tell me how old the church actually is.

Test. 1834. 1834. If you were to look at the story of the church since 1834, 1834, you would not find a straight line from A to B. Pretty sure of that. Some of you know I was a pastorist up the road in Yately. 1827. Got you beat. The very first minute books of the church describe how that when people went to church in 1827, they were pelted with rotten fruit because they were non-conformists. So even in the little things, the advance of the gospel is never straightforward. And don't be discouraged, therefore, by sometimes when you feel you're blown a little off course, where sometimes things don't work out quite as you hoped.

Take the long view. Take the 30-year view. Be encouraged. Thank God. Just as Paul did.

[ 14 : 00 ] There's a remarkable report that's come out this week. You may have seen it produced by the Bible Society. It's called A Quiet Revival. It's reported in the news. It's on the BBC. It's been in the newspapers. If you haven't seen it, do look it up. It's a fascinating report that talks about, especially amongst people that we would think are just not interested in the gospel, people between 18 and 25 especially, there has been something of a revival going on, certainly in church attendance.

Now, I recognise that doesn't necessarily translate into people who are born-again believers, but there is something going on in the country. Perhaps you felt a little bit of that here, that there is an interest. My generation are the most cynical and the least likely, sorry, to be in church on a Sunday morning. But amazingly, amongst younger people, there is a hunger for spiritual things. There's a hunger to know God. There's something going on. And the Bible Society report is fascinating because it asks, why is that? And it lists a number of reasons why that is, all of which we would say are bad things.

So COVID made people start questioning and thinking that the militant atheism that was around. You remember Richard Dawkins? Disappeared really now, hasn't he? But you remember him and all the things that he was saying and the airtime that he was getting and it felt like Christians were being squeezed and pushed down. And the Bible Society report says people have reacted against that because that ends up being empty. Distrust in human leaders, the report says. Yeah, we look at our leaders in the country and we look at some of the so-called Christian leaders and we can sort of think, what hope is that really? But actually, it's this very thing, says the Bible Society report, which has caused a younger generation especially to want to know answers, to want to ask questions. Do you see how it's worked even in the last five to ten years? That all the things I might have grumbled about, all the things I might have complained about as I was sipping my coffee or sharing a quiche with you over lunch, you know what we're like, Christians, you know, all the stuff that we mutter and mumble about, turns out to have been used by the

Lord to advance the gospel. You know, sometimes we wish that the gospel was a straight road heading towards the horizon. But most of the time it looks like this. It's windy, it's bendy.

And as we look back on our lives, you look back on the life of the church, you look back on your own life. It's rarely straightforward. Just think of your personal evangelism. Think of conversations

you've tried to have maybe with family members. I don't come from a Christian family, so I think about my family. Or you think about neighbours. Think about people you work with. They're not straightforward, are they? No, I'll just tell them the gospel and they'll say, oh yes, that's nice. I'd like to become a Christian, please. It doesn't often happen. It does sometimes, but it rarely happens. The Owen and I and Carrie were both in the same church in East London, surrounded by Bengali Muslims. The youth worker there, Andy Mossop, said it took 10 years of working with Muslim young people to get just one of them to attend a Bible study. 10 years. Would you have given up? I might have done. But nothing can stop the spread of the gospel. Be encouraged.

[ 17 : 45 ] And if this morning you feel a bit blue about church, if you feel a bit blue about your own personal evangelism, you feel a bit low about it, friends, don't be. Take a step back and be encouraged that nothing can stop the spread of the gospel. But we do want to be realistic.

And so the second thing to see here is that not everyone will accept the message of the gospel. Not everyone will accept the message of the gospel. Sometimes the road is empty. I was kind of, I was trying to think, how do I get a picture that depicts that? There's no one else on the road. Paul begins in Rome as he always does to his own people. Romans 10, that's his heart's desire. And there's almost like a trial. We know that Paul has come to Rome for a trial. And Luke has got a sort of slightly ironic streak to him. And so first of all, we see a trial, but it's not the trial you expect. It's Paul operating as the prosecuting counsel, putting his case before his own people, the Jewish people. He wants to talk about the hope of Israel. The hope of Israel. And of course, by the hope of Israel, verse 20, who does he mean? He means Jesus, the saviour of the world, the Messiah. You might think, well, he's not being particularly clear, the hope of Israel. What does he mean by that? But the Jewish people who were listening would have known exactly what he meant. He was here to talk about the

Messiah. Now, it seems to be a little bit surprising, verse 21, they've not heard of Paul. I mean, certainly as we read the book of Acts, Paul seems to be becoming quite notorious, doesn't he? And they replied, we have not received any letters from Judea concerning you. None of our people who have come from there has reported or said anything bad about you. So they are coming with a reasonably open mind. It's not quite clear why they haven't heard about Paul. The most likely explanation is that the Jewish leaders back in Judea were just glad to be shot of him. They didn't feel the need to sort of send letters ahead. They thought he was under arrest. They thought he was in trouble. They thought, I don't know, at best he might get off because he was a Roman citizen, but he was out of their hands, out of their minds. That's probably why they didn't send any letters. But they have heard about Christianity. Verse 22, we want to hear what your views are, for we know that people everywhere are talking against this sect. It's not a very promising start, this sect. They're anticipating this is outside of what they believe as Jewish people. So Paul gets a chance to do what he loves to do.

He gets a chance to witness to them from morning till evening, explaining about the kingdom of God and doing his pre-prepared Bible study. There it is, from the law of Moses and from the prophets, he tried to persuade them about Jesus. He tried to say to them, the hope of Israel is here.

[ 20 : 45 ] He's come. He's died for you. He's risen again. He sent his Holy Spirit. You can almost imagine the Bible study, can't you? And he gets the standard response. Some were convinced, verse 24, by what he said, but others would not believe. And it starts an argument, verse 25, they disagreed among themselves and began to leave after Paul had made this final statement.

He doesn't like to leave things, Paul. The Holy Spirit spoke the truth to your ancestors when he said through Isaiah the prophet. And he quotes from Isaiah 6, basically saying, I always knew you weren't going to believe. It was prophesied long ago. Not perhaps the way to win friends and influence people. In many ways, it's an extraordinary moment that those who are most privileged, that's what Paul calls them in Romans chapter 9 through to chapter 11. He said, really, these are the people who should be queuing up to believe. They've got the covenants. They've got the promises. They've got the scriptures.

They have the law and the prophets to point them towards Jesus. It should be extraordinary that none should believe. But they do reject the good news about Jesus. Not everyone will accept the message of the gospel. And we might say, even those you would think would be most likely to believe it.

I wonder who they are today, the people who are most likely to believe, in our minds. Who should listen to the gospel message and say, oh yeah, of course, of course. Well, I think we'd have to

include Jewish people. We should pray for those who work amongst Jewish people. A good friend of mine called Joseph Steinberg, who runs a ministry called the International Ministry for Jewish People, Mission to Jewish People, sorry, I am JP, is that right? He says, actually, it's really, really hard work.

Even though they've got all this background, all this knowledge, as Isaiah prophesied, their hearts are hardened. So do pray for Mission to Jewish People. But actually, there are other groups, aren't there, who are highly privileged, who have access to so much about the gospel, and really, in human terms, should naturally believe. And yet, not everyone will accept the spread of the gospel, message of the gospel. So I think I include in that kids in Christian families.

[ 23 : 24 ] Some of you may know the pain of that, very close to your hearts, especially with grown-up children. Our kids, and it's just wonderful to see the kids in the church. I love seeing them, and still seeing some of them, just have a wonderful privilege, don't they? It's not that they automatically become Christians, because they're in Christian families, but they have a special place.

I was mentored when I was first a pastor by Eric Lane. Some of you know Eric, or knew Eric and Joyce Lane, who were here for a while, I guess, what, 25 years ago, something like that? So some of you have been around, will remember them. And they wrote a book about children of Christian parents. They called it Special Children. What a special place they have, what a privilege they have to come to church, to listen to songs being sung, to see people worshipping the Lord, to be taught in Sunday school, to go home and read the Bible with mum and dad, and pray with mum and dad. And yet we know, don't we, so painfully, not everyone will accept the message of the gospel. Friends, don't give up. Don't give up. Don't give up. If you have children, if you know of children, of Christian parents, they've walked away from the Lord, don't give up. Keep praying. Keep seeking opportunities to live out a godly life. Keep commending them to the Lord, who loves and knows. But perhaps also under this group of people who are privileged today, we would have to say people who know you. You ever thought about it that way? You know, people who know you are highly privileged.

They know a Christian. One of the extraordinary things about the Bible study report, and it's been confirmed in a report that the Evangelical Alliance have produced as well, which is coming out towards the summer. It's more explicit in that. It's that people generally become Christians because they know a Christian. Now, there are some miraculous and amazing ways that God breaks in to places and to people's lives where they don't know any Christians. Praise God for that. But most people, certainly in this country, become Christians because they know a Christian. And so the people that you know, you know, the person that lives next door to you on one side and on the other and whose garden backs onto you, or the person that you work with, or the person that you've been friends with for 30, 40 years, they are highly privileged. And perhaps you know the pain of this as well. Not everyone will accept the message of the gospel. But some did. And maybe this privileged group today even includes you. Perhaps you're not a Christian today. I don't know, you're here for the first time, or someone's brought you along, or you've been coming years. You've never quite taken that step of faith.

[ 26 : 22 ] Well, it's great that you're here. Don't let the gospel, the good news about Jesus, pass you by. It's a message of salvation. It's a message of resurrection. It's a message of eternal life and hope.

Don't let it pass you by. Nothing will stop the advance of the gospel, but we need to be realistic that not everyone will accept the message of the gospel. Friends, we can be so easily sidetracked. We can be so easily discouraged, can't we? And I live on a new estate. My six most immediate neighbours are all single mums.

It's quite difficult for me to go and knock on the door and start up a conversation. But I've been trying to be kind. I've offered to wash their cars or mow the lawn, whatever it is. And in the eight years I've lived there, I've yet to have a decent conversation about Jesus.

And it gets me down. It's quite dispiriting, really. Every time you try to turn the conversation a slight way, or you try and talk about, oh, I was at church on Sunday, they change the subject. Do you have that experience? But let's not lose heart.

[ 27 : 42 ] Because even though in leafy Upper Hill, leafy Surrey, even though not everyone will accept the message of the gospel, some will. And we are evidence of that, aren't we?

You look around. We are evidence of that. Nothing can stop the advance of the gospel, even though not everyone will accept the message of the gospel. Don't give up. Because thirdly, Jesus commissions us to be the new messengers of the gospel.

We are taking up the role. We are picking up the baton. It's been passed on to us. Do you notice verse 28? There's a promise here at the ends of Acts.

Therefore, I want you to know that God's salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen. Now, it's not that every person will become a Christian. We obviously know that's not true. But there will be success in the gospel spreading out beyond the Jewish people and to the Gentiles of the world. It's not that there are no Jewish believers. There are many Jewish believers. You'll know some of them.

[ 28 : 58 ] But it's that the gospel has gone beyond those narrow boundaries and now is available to all, to everybody. There's no wholesale turning to Christ amongst Jewish people at the moment.

We need to continue to pray for that. And it's not that all Gentile people will believe. But the gospel has been extended to everyone. And it will get a hearing.

Again, it's a remarkable thing about this Bible Society report this week, is that people wanted to hear about Jesus. They didn't all believe. They didn't all respond. But people were okay about that. The Bible Society asked a cross-section of people how many of them would be willing to talk to Jesus if their friend asked them.

Talk about Jesus, sorry, if their friend asked them. And 35%, yeah, I'd be up for that. I think that's quite high. I think it's like 0.1%. That's how it feels to me. So I can have some boldness.

[ 29 : 58 ] I can have some courage in who I talk to about Jesus. I can have confidence that the gospel will get a hearing. But who's going to do that speaking if it's not me?

It's not going to be Paul, is it? Now, you've got to be a little bit careful about reading yourself into the story in the Bible. You can't read yourself into the story of Samson, for example.

That could end up very badly. But I think Luke is inviting us here into the story. It ends very abruptly. This is what one of the writers, I like this.

I don't normally read out quotes from writers, but this one's very short. Luke's ending is far from incomplete, awaiting another volume. The reader is the next volume.

Isn't that a great quote? Paul is chained, but the gospel is unchained. And even when he's in prison, he's able to proclaim the gospel, verse 31, with all boldness and without hindrance.

[ 30 : 59 ] Without hindrance in Greek, the language that the New Testament was written in, it's just one word. And it's the last word of Acts. The very last word of Acts. Without hindrance.

Now, it's easy for us to think today there's lots of hindrance. I can't do this. I can't do that. The reality is we are very free to share the gospel. We have many opportunities to share the gospel.

We are the next volume. Jesus commissions us to be the messengers of the gospel. And whether that's on the Sandy Hills estate this afternoon, talking to someone who's taking part in the Easter trail.

Or whether that's an invitation that you give to your neighbor and say, you know, would you like to come along on Wednesday? Looking at this thing, Jesus, the evidence. Or when you come along at Easter.

You know, whichever of those it is. Or if it's something over the summer. Or if it's something in the autumn. Or whenever it is. Jesus commissions us to be the new messengers of the gospel.

[ 32 : 06 ] Nothing can stop the spread of the gospel. Because the gospel has been given to Bethel Baptist Church. Gospel's been given to you. Jesus has commissioned you.

And given you his Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit of power. So that you and I can be those new messengers of the gospel. Where we live.

Where we work. In our homes. With our families. With our children. And we do it with confidence. Because we know that although not everyone will accept the gospel.

Nothing can stop the spread of the gospel. I've got a big bit of white space in my Bible. I don't know what it looks like in yours. Similar. This is the bit for us to fill in.

You know, there isn't an Acts 29 or an Acts 30 or a 31. You turn the page. You suddenly get to something very different. You get to the book of Romans. But the reality is we are there. And it is our story.

[ 33 : 07 ] Paul says, and so we came to Rome. We're not quite sure. But he probably never left. But the gospel did. And continues to the ends of the earth.

Continues to Surrey. Continues to Farnham. Continues to Upper Hill. It's reached you. And now through you and I, it's reaching other places and other people.

What a great commission. Acts 1 begins with a great commission. It's amazing. It's supernatural. It's spectacular. Let me tell you as we finish.

Acts 28 ends with a great commission. It's just as supernatural. It's just as spectacular. It's just as wonderful. It's our commissioning.

To take this gospel that never stops out into the world. Let's pray. Father, we pray for what's happening this afternoon.

[ 34 : 12 ] For Jesus, the evidence on Wednesday. For every moment and opportunity, we have to live for Christ and speak of Jesus. We pray for your Holy Spirit's enabling and power.

And even when not everyone accepts the gospel, please help us to not lose heart. But like Paul, to thank you and to be encouraged. Thank you that we have seen so clearly that nothing can stop the spread of the gospel.

Strengthen our hearts. In boldness we pray. In Jesus' name. Amen.