

# Acts 28:17–31

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, good morning. I join my welcome with all those who have greeted you this far this morning.

It's a joy to be together. Thank you for being here. My name is Bing. I'm part of the pastoral team here. I have the privilege of serving the university community as one of my roles.

And so if you are new to the university community and you have just found your way here, it would be my great delight to meet you in person this morning. As we make our way, please join me as I pray for us.

Father, as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return but water the earth, may your word go forth from your mouth.

Would it not return empty but accomplish all that you purpose for it to accomplish? Would it succeed for which you send it out for?

[ 1 : 05 ] Help us, God, as we turn to your word. For Jesus' sake. Amen. Amen. Well, today marks the 53rd sermon in the book of Acts.

For some, that was far too long. For others, it was probably maybe a little too short. But we come to the conclusion of Luke's two-volume history on early Christianity.

Endings and conclusions aim to bring closure, often to novels or movie scripts. Good endings make for great books. And likewise, good endings wrap up great movies.

Some end with the feeling of happily ever after. Usually, Disney films do that. And sadly, that's not always the case in all movies.

Some end with the feeling of what just happened. We come to the end of Luke's record. And it leaves us with mixed feelings.

[ 2 : 18 ] Mixed feelings. The book ends on quite an unusual note. Because we're left feeling a bit disoriented. The ending is brief.

It's abrupt as if it were rushed. Possibly even incomplete. We're left with some feeling of open-endedness. That some scholars have even proposed that Luke intended a third volume that never went to print.

And I want to propose this morning that the book ends on two notes. Tragedy and triumph. I take for my title this morning, the tragedy and the triumph of the gospel.

My desire for our time this morning is for us to witness that there is a great tragedy that surrounds the gospel. Specifically, it's rejection.

Yet, while some reject it, it remains undeterred, insuppressible, unable to be extinguished.

Extinguished, and it marches on triumphantly.

[ 3 : 25 ] I have chosen to split our text in two. Divided at verse 27. Two headings. Two coat hooks to hang our time.

First, the tragedy of an unrepentant heart. Secondly, the triumph of an unrelenting word.

Tragedy and triumph. Well, verse 16. Paul enters, arrives into the eternal, earthly city of Rome.

It's not any grandiose entrance by any means. However, if you follow Luke closely, he dispels the idea that this final leg of the journey into Rome was insignificant.

They boarded a vessel that had two little g-gods fastened to it. And there, on board, it bore the messenger of the capital G, God.

[ 4 : 34 ] Chapter 28, verse 10 tells us, The ship is lavishly supplied, for all that was needed was provided. It stopped along the way.

It received hospitality and generosity from those they met. The perspective that would be so intriguing would be actually the centurion, Julius.

Imagine what he was thinking. He was assigned to escort Paul, a prisoner, to Rome. And by now, he's surely wondering, who in the world is this man?

He's a prisoner, yet he's sent off with the wealth of an island. He's supported along the way and greeted by brothers he has never met. Julius was to escort Paul into Rome.

In reality, Paul was escorting Julius into Rome. The initial ship departed bore wheat. The ship that docked in Rome was a luxury yacht.

[ 5 : 37 ] One cannot help but get a sense that Luke wanted to convey that God's ambassador, who was bearing God's word, did not simply limp into Rome.

He marched into Rome. Though forecasted that Paul would stand before Caesar and give an account, Luke is actually silent in this regard.

It's one of the many challenges for you and I, the reader. We want to know the final verdict. What did Caesar say about Paul? What was he accused of?

But Luke is not going to give those to us. It's as if he's already conveyed enough up to this point so that you and I are able to fill the story. You know what Paul will say to Caesar.

He'll say exactly what he said to Agrippa, to Felix, to Festus. He will declare the kingdom of God fulfilled in the Lord Jesus Christ. Luke doesn't need to tell us.

[ 6 : 38 ] He's already painted that trajectory. Instead, Luke wants to make us aware of two meetings. Two meetings between Paul and the local Jewish leadership in Rome.

Verse 17 and again in verse 23. Beginning in verse 17, Paul does what he always does throughout the book of Acts. Namely, he engages the local Jewish leadership.

It's a pattern we've seen. And since he's under house arrest, he's unable to go to the local synagogue. So he summons the local leaders to come to him. And in this first meeting, in verses 17 to 22, he highlights a few things.

He wants to establish that he is not only innocent, but he is loyal to Judaism. The language is so careful in how Luke crafts this. Paul has an allegiance to the customs of his fathers.

He has done nothing against his people. Verse 17. He was examined and found innocent in verse 18. There was no charge that he was bringing against his own countrymen.

[ 7 : 53 ] You see, what had happened, what Paul was enabled to do, is because he had been up to this point arguably falsely accused. He could have actually flipped the tables and started accusing the Jewish community of slandering him or defamation or a counter lawsuit of sorts.

But Paul refrained. He held back. Imagine the fallout that would have landed in Jerusalem if Paul, a Roman citizen, decided to pursue legal action.

He brought no charge against his nation. Furthermore, in verse 21, there was no correspondence, no letters had arrived to Rome that were speaking evil against Paul.

But most significantly, I think, the reason in verse 21 is worth noting. For Paul, he was wearing chains because of Israel's hope.

He wants Israel to know that he is a friend, not a foe. This is the great irony of all this. He was on trial because he was an ally of Judaism.

[ 9 : 09 ] He was on trial because he was trying to defend the hope of Judaism. He was imprisoned for their sake. For the sake of his kinsmen. And this is the shape that many lives of God's messengers takes.

In their faithfulness to God, they are often rejected by the people to whom they are sent. The prophets of God are often those who are scorned by the people they serve.

It's true in the life of Moses. It's true in the life of Elijah. It's true for the prophet Isaiah.

It's true for the prophet Jeremiah. And it's true for Paul himself. Those for whom he wore the chains despised him.

Those for whom he suffered rejected him. Those for whom he endured unjust treatment would turn against him. And this is the prophetic pattern.

[ 10 : 12 ] The man whom God appoints is often rejected by those he is sent to serve. Well, the Jewish leadership in Rome doesn't sense a threat from Paul.

They approve of him in some sense. He's both innocent and loyal. He is credible. He's not a suspect messenger. He's not divisive and moral.

And so now they appoint a day, the text tells us. So that Paul can speak about this sect. A Jewish sect. Earlier mentioned in the book of Acts.

Known as the sect of the Nazarenes. Well, the second meeting unfolds in verse 23. It's underway. And word has gone out. Paul is defending a dissertation or a thesis of sort. He's giving a lecture that draws greater numbers. And on this day, it's not a one-hour defense. It's not a two-hour defense.

[11:16] It's not even a three-hour defense. It's an all-day, morning-to-even defense. And it's not only academic and intellectual.

But he's expounding. He's testifying. He's trying to persuade. That day's aim, he's trying to convince the hearers that Jesus is the king of God's kingdom.

According to the Jewish scriptures. Beginning in the law and the prophets. For Paul was convinced that he was not out of line with the Hebrew scriptures. He recognized that there is a significant cord that runs from the front end to the back end.

That what the Old Testament saw as anticipatory, looking ahead, is actually fulfilled in Jesus. What was predicted and foretold was completed now in Christ.

Promises made by the Old Testament are promises kept by the new. See, Luke, interestingly, closes both his gospel and Acts with this truth.

[12:27] Do you remember how Luke's gospel ends? That Jesus, the resurrected Jesus, was walking on the road. And there he encounters two guys who are distraught because Jesus had earlier been put to death.

And they're walking on the road. And they begin conversing. And Jesus actually rebukes the two. And says, Oh foolish ones, slow to heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken.

And the text tells us, And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them all the scriptures concerning himself.

At the conclusion of Luke's gospel, Jesus asserted that all the Hebrew Bible attested to himself. At the end of Acts, Luke records, Paul is doing the exact same thing.

He is asserting that all the Hebrew scriptures attest not to him, Paul, but to Jesus. It's all about Jesus. Well, the outcome is mixed.

[13:43] Some were convinced, but others disbelieved. As a result, disunity and division occurs among the Jewish leadership. And Paul was not successful in convincing the entirety of his audience.

Instead of wide acceptance and unity, division erupted. And as disagreement ensues, Paul shuts the night down with a scathing citation from Isaiah chapter 6.

Those in Paul's company hear the words of Isaiah the prophet. And they are pretty much told this. Your ears, your eyes, and your heart, which are meant for hearing, seeing, and understanding, have lost their power of comprehension and perception.

What an unnatural state. The organs that you were given to perceive reality contradict their very own purpose.

And as a result, it has blocked God's desire to heal them. The sensory organs are no longer functioning.

[15:04] Their hearts are dull. The Greek is actually, their hearts are so fat. And it's inflicted them, and it's calloused them to such a degree that they refuse to turn in order to be healed.

And he quotes, Paul quotes Isaiah chapter 6. And he actually stands in line with the prophet and the Holy Spirit in indicting the Jewish leaders. See, what Paul was experiencing in that moment in Rome, at his home, was the re-fulfilling of Isaiah's prophecy in Isaiah chapter 6.

The prophecy of rejection. In the same way that their fathers rejected Isaiah, they are now rejecting Paul. Like father, like son.

They are re-fulfilling the prophetic word. Paul, Paul, Isaiah, and the Holy Spirit all agree in their judgment and pronouncement.

And as students of the Bible, you'll see this. Oftentimes we think of maybe a prophecy that just is fulfilled one time.

[16:14] But actually, over the movement and the progression of Scripture, you actually see it quite often. that prophecies are fulfilled over and over and over.

The same one attesting to its truthfulness. The Jews in Rome, those whose very identities were rooted in being the people of God, bearers of the divine promise, God's chosen and special people, refuse to acknowledge their king.

It's tragic. The quotation is so vivid. Senses given to sense are somehow crippled and not functioning.

Ears that cannot hear. Eyes that cannot see. Hearts that cannot feel. Wayward and rebellious wills that will not turn.

Therefore, healing is refused. It is the tragedy of the unrepentant heart. It is the tragedy of an unrepentant heart.

[17:27] Judaism still carries that sense even today. This past week I had an opportunity to table at the Registered Student Organization Fair here at UChicago.

And hundreds of student organizations are tabling, promoting their clubs and their organizations. And of course, I was representing Holy Trinity.

And as hundreds, if not thousands of students wound their way through these tables, exploring extracurricular activities, there I was among them. And my opening line, it probably wasn't the best opening line, was, Hello, are you looking for a church?

I was ignored by 95% of them. It seemed that most of them actually accelerated when they heard my opening line. But I remember this one response.

Young man. He looked at me. And I said, Hi, are you looking for a church? And he looked at me. And he said, I'm Jewish.

[18:35] And it was conveyed in such a way that he thought that was the ultimate play. That is the trump card. What are you going to say? What can you say? He gave me that, Ha!

I gotcha. Look. And my response, given the fact that I was in this text all week, was this.

It's actually quite surprising that you're not in church. Because all the promises of God are buried in your ancestry.

The entire hope of the world is locked in your lineage. The notion of being a kingdom at all, a kingdom of priests, is established in your people.

And I didn't say this. But you spurned your king. And I don't say that in any anti-Semitic way.

[19:37] But I say that because that's all of humanity. That we've enthroned whatever, or whomever, whatever ideology, ideology on a throne.

We've spurned our king. The great tragedy is that healing is refused. See, the tragedy this morning is that it is not that Paul is unjustly imprisoned, though that is tragic.

The tragedy is not that an innocent man is sitting in house arrest. The tragedy is not that he's stuck there for at least two years.

The tragedy is not that the fact that the man of God is ostracized. The great tragedy is that the gospel, that which will heal all of humanity, is rejected.

This is the great gospel tragedy. And there are some, like this passage, who hear exposition, hear testimony, hear the word of God, and disbelieve.

[20:51] how great the tragedy will be in that last day when out of your willfulness you plummet yourself to destruction.

You're given ears to hear. You're given eyes to see. You're given a heart to perceive. You're given a will to choose. I am convinced that many of us choose to disbelieve, not because there's a lack of evidence, not because there's a lack of human experience, but because you willfully will not submit. You will not repent. And therefore, you cannot be healed. The tragedy of an unrepentant heart.

Secondly, the triumph of an unrelenting word. Yet the gospel is undeterred. In light of the rebellion of humanity, the fact that it is rejected does not thwart its saving or healing power.

The fact that some deny the gospel does not make it less true. In spite of the rejection of the Jews at Rome, Paul reiterates what he has already done on multiple occasions.

[22:12] That because of their rejection, he's going to reorient himself and turn to the Gentiles, citing their receptivity. What the Jew could not hear, the Gentile would.

What the Jew could not see, the Gentile would behold. What the Jew would not understand, the Gentile would embrace. In other words, as some reject it, many will receive it.

In the end, it will triumph over the greatest strategy of gospel rejection. It will triumph. This is what these final three verses embody.

The gospel is triumphant. And there you have Paul, a minister of the gospel, shackled to a guard. And what is he up to? Freely preaching the gospel.

In his rented home. In the same way he hosted meetings for the Jewish leaders, he hosts gatherings for anyone, catch that word, all who came, certainly both Jews and Gentiles, all who

came, sat under the proclamation of the kingdom of God and were taught about the Lord Jesus Christ.

[ 23 : 23 ] Notice the duration. Two years. Paul is unobstructed for two years. And during these two years, I mean, just imagine it. He is, he is under house arrest, under the jurisdiction of Rome.

History tells us that most likely soldiers rotated watching him and possibly had to be fastened to him. And there he was. Two years. I'm guessing every day.

I mean, because if Paul was there, I'd go every day. Paul, tell me. What's up? And he would go. Let me tell you about Jesus. Let me tell you about the kingdom of God. And this poor soldier is sitting there.

But, but catch this. He's able to do it unhindered. Meaning that even though Rome was sitting there, the gospel was going out under Rome's watch as Caesar sat in his palace.

There in the little house, another king was being declared and announced under Rome's watch and under Rome's protection. So probably the Jews were angry.

[ 24 : 31 ] I got to go get Paul. I got to shut him up. I got to quiet him. Sorry, I shouldn't say that. But I got to keep him quiet. But they're deterred. Why? Well, there's a guard fastened to him.

And you see that word unhindered possibly has these legal connotations. That what he was doing was not illegal. That it was permissible. And for two years, it goes on and out every single day under the complacent eye of imperial authority.

In God's economy, the Romans were providing both the opportunity for the message and protecting its messenger. It's true. So, there was a soldier next to me, armed soldier.

I would be a little more bold. Possibly. And toward the end of Paul's life, this is what he gives hint at when he writes the second letter to Timothy.

His successor, his son in the faith. He says, Remember Jesus, Timothy. He's risen from the dead. He's the offspring or the descendant of David, the king of Israel.

[ 25 : 51 ] For which I am suffering. And I'm bound with chains as a criminal, he would write. But the word of God is not bound.

Regardless of the circumstances of the servants of the word, the word would propagate. It's unrelenting in nature. It will not stop.

It will not yield. It will not relent. It marches triumphantly. And if your heart senses that it's banging or pounding or poking or prodding, it will not stop.

It cannot stop. It's always triumphant through the book of Acts. It's always been this way, hasn't it? In truth, the word of the gospel has never been deterred.

If you trace it through the entirety of the book, it triumphs all the way through in a sinful and sin-filled world.

[ 26 : 52 ] It is God's solution for all the world. Do you recall how the book of Acts has unfolded this? I'm going to trace it quickly. It triumphs even when the physical Lord Jesus has departed.

It triumphs over social and cultural and linguistic barriers. It triumphs over human deception and depravity in Ananias and Sapphira. It triumphs over the death of dear servants Stephen and the James, the brother of John.

It triumphs over persecution and dissemination. It triumphs over sorcery and the demonic. It triumphs over the blind. It triumphs over the bedridden. It triumphs over even the dead.

It triumphs over racial divisions and social class distinctions. It triumphs over internal agreements even among its own leaders. It triumphs over the bastions of intellectual thought in Athens.

It triumphs over spiritual strongholds in Ephesus. It triumphs in a world where there was famine. It triumphs in a world where nature was destructive. It triumphs over storms.

[ 27 : 57 ] It triumphs over shipwreck. It triumphs over imprisonment. It triumphs over the heart of a woman merchant. It triumphs over the heart of a Philippian jailer. It triumphs over all.

And people ask you, where is your God? Well, let me tell you. He's always triumphed. And the gospel is his solution to a sin-filled world.

The Bible doesn't tell us where evil originates, but he surely tells us how evil ends in the gospel. And it will triumph even though kings and rulers attempt to thwart it.

This is the triumphant word of God. Oh, it's unstoppable. It will not and cannot be destroyed.

So what happened to Paul as I close? Well, church history tells us, but Luke does not. He has no need to.

[ 29 : 07 ] This is not a biography. This is a conquest narrative. The conquering nature of the word of God. God will bury his workmen before he buries his work.

He will bury all of us and the gospel will go on. He will cause us even if we all end up mute, the gospel will still go out.

His servants may lie on the ground, but be reminded that the word of the Lord endures forever. Well, the fate of Paul is secondary to Acts.

because the final picture is primary. Namely, the kingdom of God is being proclaimed and the Lord Jesus Christ is being taught with all boldness and without hindrance.

The glorious news of this gospel, this triumphant gospel, is that it triumphs even over human rejection.

[ 30 : 22 ] you may sit in this room this morning and you've been unwilling. You may sit in this room this morning under immense duress.

There is a darkness over your soul. There is anxiety that you cannot tame. There is loss that you cannot restore. There is pain that you cannot heal. There is hope that you cannot access.

And the Lord Jesus Christ says, if you are willing to repent and turn, I will heal you.

May God's Spirit conquer your will this morning. and may your testimony be that God triumphed over my rebellion.

Jesus was in the world and the world was made through him yet the world did not know him. He came to his very own and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.

[ 31 : 53 ] Let us pray. Father, we come to you this morning. And at times, it seems that we are a feeble and a weak people.

And at times, it seems like things are out of control. And at times, it seems like all the world is unraveling. And we're reminded that the gospel continues to march.

And the gospel continues to be proclaimed. And the gospel continues to save. And so, Father, would you save for Jesus' sake?

Amen. Amen.