

The Gospel for the World

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[0 : 00] It's great to be with you again as we finish in our series in Acts, finish in the book of Acts. It's always nice when we get to finish something and wrap it up.

Let me pray before we enter into this final section of Acts. Father, we thank you so much for giving us a record of what happened in the early church and seeing what has happened, not just with Paul, but with the other apostles as well.

Please encourage us as we now look at the final section and spur us on to do the same by the power of your Spirit. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Well, I wonder what you make of this phrase, one size fits all. Perhaps you might be relieved because then you don't have to worry what size you are.

Or you might be slightly sceptical because how can it be? How can it be one size fits all? Well, take for instance men's socks.

[1 : 08] One size fits all, three pairs for \$10. I'm sure you guys have bought some of those before. But is it possible that there are socks that would fit both our dear youth pastor Jeff Hall and myself?

One size fits all. I don't think it works. Maybe it does. Only if it's ankle high for him and knee high socks for me.

Now, some other things like prescription glasses. Certainly not one size fits all. Dentures. None of you have them, I'm pretty sure. One size fits all.

Bridal gowns. Some of you ladies have been working that out. Certainly no one size fits all. Off the shelf stuff, right? Bespoke fitting. Well, today we are reminded again as we look into the final chapter of Acts that when it comes to the gospel, actually for the gospel, it is one size fits all.

Luke will show us again that when it comes to the most important thing in the world, that of salvation and life in God's kingdom, the gospel is indeed one size fits all.

[2 : 22] Maybe, let's call it one message that saves all. Jesus really is the answer for all humanity, both Jew and Gentile.

Well, last week we ended with Paul arriving safely in Rome. Now in verse 17, Paul has gathered the Jews that were living there. So we read, Three days later he called together the local Jewish leaders.

When they had assembled, Paul said to them, My brothers, although I have done nothing against our people or against the customs of our ancestors, I was arrested in Jerusalem and handed over to the Romans.

They examined me and wanted to release me because I was not guilty of any crime deserving death. The Jews objected, so I was compelled to make an appeal to Caesar. I certainly did not intend to bring any charge against my own people.

Now Paul has done this because he's not sure if the Jews in Jerusalem had already spread rumors of him as a troublemaker. He wants to assure the Jews in Rome that he's not.

[3 : 26] In fact, Paul's keen to show that he's not even against them at all. He addresses them, can you see, even though they're not Christians, as brothers. He says, I'm not against your customs.

And even the Roman rulers have agreed that I've not done anything wrong. It's only because the Jews have objected that Paul appeals to Caesar.

And so Paul goes on to say in verse 20, in fact, that his message about Jesus is actually for them, the Jews. He says, it is because of the hope of Israel that I'm bound with this chain.

You see, he's trying to win them over, isn't it? And everywhere Paul has been, he has always first gone to the Jews to persuade them that Jesus is their Messiah. This message he has is first and foremost for them because God in Jesus has come to restore his kingdom.

So here again in Rome, Paul is not just trying to prevent them from opposing him. He actually wants to show them that in Jesus, they have found the fulfillment of their hopes.

[4 : 32] Well, despite Paul's initial fears, it seems that the Jews in Rome weren't opposed to Paul. Not yet. For they replied in verse 21, we have not received any letters from Judea concerning you and none of our people who have come from there has reported or said anything bad about you.

But we want to hear what your views are for we know that the people everywhere are talking against this sect. So no opposition to Paul specifically, but much talk against Christianity generally.

And not just in Jerusalem or Rome, but everywhere. Still, the people here are open-minded and they want to give Paul a chance to speak. And so this is an opportunity that Paul never passes up on.

Even more so when we read that there are more people than was first thought of that were attracted to what he had to say. For they arranged to meet Paul on a certain day and came even in larger numbers to the place where he was staying.

He witnessed to them from morning to evening, explaining about the kingdom of God and from the law of Moses and from the prophets, he tried to persuade them about Jesus. This then is an amazing opportunity for Paul, isn't it?

[5 : 47] He had come to Rome thinking he was going to go on trial, but the next thing you know, he's given this opportunity to witness. Morning to evening, explaining the kingdom of God, which is Israel's hope that this was now fulfilled in their Messiah, Jesus.

And notice that what he uses are the Jewish scriptures themselves, right? The law of Moses and of the prophets. Now this is exactly what Jesus himself did.

Luke wrote both the Gospel as well as the Book of Acts. And in the end of his Gospel, he said that Jesus opened the Scriptures to his disciples and showed them from the law and the prophets the same things, that he, Jesus, was God's promised Messiah.

So, this good news of Jesus is the Gospel for the Jews. Their own Scriptures itself have promised and prophesied that this would be the case.

And so, if you have Jewish friends who understand their culture, their history, and their scriptures, then, if they haven't done so already, they ought to hear about Jesus.

[7 : 02] All the promises that God makes to the people of Israel, all their longings for a restoration of David's kingdom, all their desires for security and peace, are found in Jesus.

even now, the modern nation of Israel, you can see, are desperately seeking peace with their neighbours, can't you see? And, of course, we pray for a political outcome, even as many of the citizens are protesting on the streets.

But I have to say that true peace and security for them ultimately lies not in a peace agreement, not in a border war, but in their Messiah Jesus.

He is the one that ultimately can give them true peace and security. Well, back in Paul's time, the gospel message was received with mixed reactions.

It divided those listening to Paul, as we see in verse 24. It says, some were convinced by what he said, but others would not believe. Now, it's wrong to say, then, that all the Jews have rejected the gospel.

[8 : 12] That was not the case then, and it's not the case today. We do know that there are those who are ethnically Jews today who do believe in Jesus. Some of them are among us in the churches.

Others have formed their own Messianic church. But often, when they believe, they are rejected by their own Jewish people because they are seen as undermining the Jewish faith of Judaism.

Well, as Paul kept preaching, this happened as well in verse 25. They disagreed among themselves and began to leave after Paul had made this final statement. The Holy Spirit spoke the truth to your ancestors when he said through Isaiah the prophet, go to these people and say, you will be ever hearing but never understanding.

You will be ever seeing but never perceiving. For this people's heart has become calloused. They hardly hear with their ears and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise, they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn and I would heal them.

You see, even the rejection by the Jews of their Messiah is something that has already been prophesied in their scriptures. One of their very own prophets, Paul says, has already predicted, foretold their very reactions.

[9 : 41] And so, what is happening now is not a surprise for God. But notice where the problem really lies. If you read over that again, it's not with their ears, is it?

Or their eyes. The problem lies with their hearts. Why are they hearing but never understanding? Why are they seeing but never perceiving?

Well, if you look at verse 27, it says, For this people's heart has become calloused. It is the heart that is the problem.

And God, of course, here is not just speaking with individual people's hearts. I think collectively, too, He's talking about the heart, singular, of the nation. But the root cause is still the same.

Pride, rebellion, and a failure to repent. Now, in Isaiah's time, their sin was that of idolatry. They had worshipped the gods of the other nations.

[10 : 43] But, you know, even that sin wasn't really the problem. Yes, it was a problem, but it's not the real fatal cause of their problems. The fatal cause was really their failure to repent despite repeated warnings.

You see, that's how hearts are hardened. Not by the sin itself. Sinning itself is not the thing that hardens your heart, but the failure to repent is what hardens your heart.

Even after being warned over and over again, if you fail to repent, that is the thing that makes your heart calloused. Now, just think about your own reactions.

We get embarrassed, don't we, when we do wrong. In fact, some of us become indignant when we're called out for our mistakes. Even though we know we're wrong, we want to dig our heels in.

Why is that? Because by nature, we are proud and self-righteous. We think we're better than we are and we don't like it when our faults are exposed to others and by others.

[11 : 59] The real problem, you see, though, for God isn't that we're wrong or sinful. Yes, sin is a problem, but God already knows that. He already provided for that by sending His Son, Jesus, so that we can have our sins forgiven.

No, our weaknesses and failures don't surprise Him. What is fatal is the hardening of our hearts. When we refuse to admit we're wrong, turn away from sin, come back to Him when He's given us a chance and yet we refuse.

That's when it's fatal because the heart becomes hardened. Not by the sin itself, but by the hardening of the heart when we refuse to acknowledge that sin.

And friends, this is a universal problem for all humans, not just for Jews, but for the Jews in particular, their hardness of heart meant they rejected the one whom God sent to fulfill their very hope for the nation.

All their longings for the kingdom of God to live in security and peace under God's chosen King, all that is found in God's Son, Jesus. He's exactly the person that they've been waiting for for generations since the exile.

[13 : 11] And yet, because of their hardness of heart and their failure to admit their pride and sin, for many of them, teachers of the law, the rulers, the Pharisees, they were self-righteous, you see.

They then missed God's very answer when it arrived. They spent their entire lives preparing, but in the wrong way. They were trying to be perfect in their own strength and wisdom instead of waiting for their Savior and then repenting when He came.

And that's why Isaiah says, there will be ever hearing and never understanding. There will be ever seeing but never perceiving. You know, sometimes I'm pretty sure you have struggled in your own studies.

Maybe it's a difficult topic in economics or chemistry. You know, your teacher has provided you with the detailed notes trying to explain or illustrate to you in multiple ways this difficult concept.

And yet, because you've missed this one critical, I don't know, point, the thing that unlocks it, you know, you can keep reading those notes over and over and over again, can't you?

[14 : 24] And it still doesn't make sense. Well, that's how it is with the Old Testament for them. They spent hours pouring over the Scriptures, memorizing it, trying to make sense of it.

And yet, because they missed this one thing, that they are sinners in need of a Savior and that their first response is to repent, not to try harder, when Jesus, their Savior, comes, they reject Him.

And instead of receiving Him with joy, they become resentful. Even more so when they're told that Jesus came not just for the Jews, but for those sinful Gentiles as well.

Those people that they thought were too sinful to be saved. And so with that, in fulfillment to Scripture, Paul now says he will turn to the Gentiles.

Just as he's been doing in the past throughout most of Acts, verse 28 says, therefore, I want you to know that God's salvation has been sent to the Gentiles and they will listen.

[15 : 28] Now, of course, Paul's not doing this for the very first time. He's already been doing this, as I said, in the rest of the empire. And Paul's also not saying that had the Jews turned to Christ, then the gospel would have been preached to the Gentiles.

Instead, had the Jews turned to Jesus as their Savior en masse, as a whole nation, I think what would have happened instead would be that they would have then been this entire nation reaching out to the Gentiles, drawing and attracting them just like a city on a hill with the light bringing people into its very city.

But Paul's point here is that Israel's failure to believe is not going to hinder the gospel. Their rejection of the gospel is not going to hold up God's plan for salvation.

And again, even though Paul says that the Gentiles will listen, he's not predicting that all Gentiles will believe. All he's saying is that there will be among the Gentiles some who will listen and believe, even though they didn't have the promises of the Old Testament given to them in the first place on which to base their hope.

Those promises are still for them, even though originally they were for Israel. And look, if you just take a look at us around today, just look at each other, that is true, isn't it?

[16:52] You can look at each other, it's okay. I don't know how many of you are Jewish, have Jewish blood, but most of us are Gentiles, aren't we? And yet, God has saved us, God has called us, some of us have listened and believed.

And not just us in this room, but many more across the world, isn't it, and history. We have listened and put our faith in Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, and yet now the Savior of the world, so that all of us can come into the kingdom, come into God's kingdom, the true Israel.

And so, with this final pronouncement, Paul went and did what he had been called to do by God, and that is to be an apostle to the Gentiles, to be Christ's witness in Rome, which is now, as I said last week, we're now at the ends of the world.

So, verse 30, for two whole years, Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to him. He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.

Now, I don't know why you feel, but this is a bit of a funny way to end the book of Acts, isn't it? But I think it's a very beautiful way to end the book of Acts, because what we say is that Paul may be chained, but the gospel is free.

[18:14] And Luke doesn't even bother, does he, to inform us what happened to Paul. For the last, I don't know how many weeks, we've been journeying with Paul, trying to get to Rome, trying to see what will happen when he goes on trial.

Is Paul finally cleared before the emperor? We don't know. Was he eventually set free? We don't know. Now, if you read the history books, there is some indication that he was free, but we don't know for sure.

And that's because, for Luke, that is of no great importance for the book of Acts. Acts was never about Paul. Instead, just like every other book in the Bible, Acts is about Jesus.

It's about his work by the Spirit through his disciples. Acts is about the gospel, and how salvation can be found whether you're a Jew or a Gentile, in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ, who died for our sins and rose to give us life.

Acts is about how, no matter what happens in the world, the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ is never hindered, because God continues to raise up witnesses who will boldly proclaim the good news.

[19:32] And so, friends, if you're here today and you're hearing this good news for the first time or recently, then let me encourage you not to be hearing but not understanding, not to be seeing but not perceiving, but rather, even as you consider who Jesus is, be careful to look at what's going on in your heart that is not being hardened because of your failure to admit that you're wrong.

The truth may be uncomfortable. When we find out that we're actually not as good as we are, that's never a nice moment. But actually, we need to hear it so that the wonderful news of Jesus can then truly be that wonderful news for us.

For here is God's Son who laid down His life for you and me, for those very sins we are ashamed of so that we don't have to face the penalty for our own wrongdoing, but instead be welcome into God's kingdom even though we don't deserve it.

And that is why the gospel is for the world because whether you're Jew or Gentile, white or black, Asian or European, anyone can belong to the kingdom of God.

Anyone who admits to their own sin and failure because we enter by the blood and work of Jesus alone, not by our own works, not by our own righteousness.

[20 : 56] And instead, if you try to do it by your own righteousness, what you end up doing is hardening your heart and in the end, barring yourself from salvation because of your stubbornness.

Now, as for those of us who have already put our trust in Jesus, we too need to maintain a heart of softness to God. We need to remain humble, not look down on others who don't believe, continue to look into our own hearts to see whether we continue to fall short, and then we ought to pray for those who have not believed and have compassion on them, and of course, be bold in our witness as Christ's disciples.

We need to be bold because we're only Christians today. You are only a Christian today because someone in your life or in your family's history was bold enough to share the gospel with us.

Someone many years ago took the trouble to proclaim the good news of Jesus so that you or your parents or your grandparents could hear, repent, and believe. Because how else would we have known what happened to Paul in Acts 28 were it not for the fact that Luke and Paul himself and others bothered to write it down and then take what has been written down to pass it on to others.

That is the word of God that we are reading right now. Had it not been that, none of us would be sitting in this room. None of us would know about Jesus. And you know, in my case, it was the missionaries from Australia and South Africa in particular that came to start a church in Singapore from which my parents were converted.

[22 : 38] At that time, many missionaries from across the world were trying to get into China but then they were kicked out because of the communists. And so many of them actually came south into Southeast Asia instead.

And it is really thanks to them that I received the gospel. And I think there's a bit of poetry there because, you know, here I am now, a bit like a missionary from Southeast Asia and I'm shredding the gospel back to the Australians.

Doing them, you know, returning the favour. Well, let me end by reading Acts chapter 1 verse 8 again because that is the summary statement. That is the whole point of Acts really.

For Jesus in that verse commands, 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 friends, let me tell you, this promise and command did not end in Acts chapter 28 verse 31. That command is still happening today.

[23 : 48] And so in a sense, all of us, we are all part of Acts. Acts chapter 29, if you like. That's not a chapter in the Bible, but that's being written in the pages of world history.

And if you take church history at Ridley as some of you are doing, you'll be able to study and read all about what has happened. And history will tell us that God's kingdom has been growing and is still growing.

And if you believe in Jesus, you have the power of the Spirit to be very much part of this history. History is still in the making and we're all being asked to be part of that history.

Acts chapter 29. Now, I don't know whether that makes you feel fearful, daunted, or really, it should make you feel excited.

Because God is inviting us as Christians to be part of a history that is not just changing today or next week or the week after. It is changing the world for eternity.

[24 : 47] what we're being asked to do is going to have eternal impact. And as I said last week, you know, God has called some of us to just be witnesses where He's put us.

But I would say that for others, God is also calling you to go from where you are now to answer God's call to be trained and equipped to become full-time gospel workers.

And I pray that God will raise up many among us to do that. People who will go from here in Melbourne to other parts of the world. Now, if God's calling you to that, will you be bold enough to say yes?

Will you be bold enough to be part of the spread of the unhindered gospel? If you hear God's voice, then, again, don't close your heart to it.

but say yes and then come and talk to me and let me help you work out how to get from here to there. Let's pray. Father, what a majestic view you have painted of your plan for this world.

[26 : 03] The plan for the name of your Son, Jesus, to be glorified, for it to be proclaimed, believed, and worshipped by people across the world, among all the nations, both Jews and Gentiles across the world.

Help us to be moved and inspired by this vision. Give us the courage to say yes, first in believing in Jesus and then by proclaiming him to all.

As a church here at HTD, but also as we are sent into the world. in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.