

The Kingdom of God at the Ends of the Earth

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[0 : 00] Please be seated, friends. Well, it's a very exciting and great day, I think, to get to the end of the book of Acts. It's an exciting book and it's great to be here at the end of the book of Acts.

It's sort of accidental, but I like the accident. I guess God is providential over how we choose what we preach here because next week we're moving into Christmas and this Christmas, Holy Trinity morning and evening, is looking at Luke's Gospel account of the first Christmas, Luke's Nativity. And Luke's Gospel is, of course, part one of the book of Acts. So we're kind of doing it the wrong way around. But it's an interesting connection to make with the start of Luke's Gospel and those great stories about the angels coming to Mary and angels coming to the shepherds and actually what actually ends up happening in the world via the book of Acts.

And I wonder if sometimes we doubt. And it's okay, I think, if you do have these doubts, to express them to someone and to me or anyone. You probably have them. But sometimes we think about Christmas as this sort of romantic event that almost obtained mythical proportions.

And it's quite hard to separate what actually what happened at Christmas and the kind of cultural baggage and romantic kind of event it's become in our kind of retelling of it.

[1 : 27] I mean, just think about, I'll give you some of these little promises that come up in Luke's Nativity story. And the question is, does this ever actually happen? Okay.

The angel Gabriel says to Mary, your baby, your son will be great. He'll be called the son of the most high. And the Lord God will give to him, what will he give to him?

The throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever and of his kingdom there will be no end. My question is, well, that's a great thing to remember at Christmas.

Does that actually ever happen? How does Luke think that played out? The obtaining of a throne. Does Jesus have a throne? Does Jesus have a kingdom?

Is this something that we say is going to happen in the future? Or has it happened? And if it has happened, how does it happen is the question, right? Let's see another example.

[2 : 23] The angel spoke to the shepherds. Again, we know this is very familiar, but the question is, how does it play out in history? The angel said, So Jesus is going to be our Messiah, but he's the great king.

And he's going to be the Lord. So he's going to be, I think in effect, the divine king. He's going to be the son of God. In what sense do we see Jesus as king played out in history?

Is it something we take off the shelf at Christmas and then put back at the end of Christmas, like a kind of Christmas tree that you unpack and pack again? How does Luke think, as he writes Luke's gospel, how does he think it's going to play out in history?

Well, I think, friends, the answer is what we've been looking at in the book of Acts. Luke actually expects these great promises of the birth of this king and of a kingdom that will have no end to be exactly played out in what you see in the book of Acts.

We began the book of Acts three years ago in chapter one, and I made the point there that I want to come back to now just to bracket the book, that Acts is actually not the Acts of the Apostles, as some Bibles wrongly have it.

[3 : 49] It's not the Acts of the Holy Spirit that some Christians sort of try and emphasize. The book of Acts is and was and has been, as we've looked at it, the Acts of the King Jesus, the risen King Jesus.

The book of Acts is the Acts of the Kingdom of God under the rain tears of God's right hand that fulfilled everything that was promised in Bethlehem, in the stable, in the heaven, in the heavens, and it is all coming true in the book of Acts.

That is what we need to think. Now maybe they've done with Ryan and it's on the Christmas so much that it's hard to master it onto preaching acts. I mean, acting like a secret of the church, preaching, that's not as exciting as a kingdom that will have no end.

They do the same thing. I mean, let me put it through, as we bridge into Paul as a prisoner on a boat going to Rome, is it not inconceivable that a king of the world born in a stable could have as one of his chief messengers a prisoner travelling in chains to Rome?

You know, there's a match there, I think, that the king who was so exalted, yet so lowly and humble to be born in a stable, a king who died on a cross, and that's unexpected, would have as his chief messengers chained apostles, a suffering church.

[5 : 17] The very things we read in Acts do match what Luke is telling us happens at the first Christmas. Now let's just go into a little bit more detail to get a feel for this as we look at Paul and his last leg to get to Rome.

Now he's actually now onto his third boat. He gets through boats quite quickly. They get trashed when he's in them. Three months later, verse 11, we set sail on a new ship that had wintered at the island.

So they're on the island of Malta. They were travelling at the wrong time of year. They got shipwrecked and they just made it and they spent the winter on the island of Malta preaching the gospel. And we found a new Alexandrian ship because they wrecked the other Alexandrian ship with the twin brothers as its figurehead.

The twin brothers, by the way, are the two sons of the pagan god Zeus, Castor and Pollux. And so it's sort of ironic that they put these kind of pagan things on boats to get safe travel.

But we know from reading Acts that it's the Lord Jesus who has been controlling the weather and the safety of every ship. We put in at Syracuse and that's modern day Sicily and stayed there for three days.

[6 : 31] It really helps to read Acts to have a map open, I think, and to follow where we're going. I don't have one today. I had one last week. But as you're reading Acts in your quiet time, have a map open. It may also be helpful if your minister is preaching through Acts to pay for them to travel and have a holiday there or something.

Just a little hint. You don't seem to be getting it. I've put up a map. You still don't get it. Verse 13, And then we weighed and came to Regium. And Regium is basically, if Italy is a boot, and they say it is, Regium's the toe on the boot.

So we're here in Italy. And here's a good thing. There we found believers and were invited to stay with them for seven days. And possibly at Patali, it's a port.

So they may not be people who, Christians who live there. There may be actually other travellers who are there temporarily. And then Luke tells us, and we need to throw streamers at this point, at the end of verse 14, And so we came to Rome.

He's made it. The apostle has made it. Just as Jesus promised, he's made it. Even though it took trials, took five years of being a prisoner, lost in the system, he's made it.

[7 : 46] It took shipwrecks and storms, but he's made it. And I suspect there's some contrast here that last week the travels were tumultuous and difficult. This week Luke just says, we had smooth sailing.

The wind was right. The sea was right. The boat was right. We got there in a day. Easy. And I think Luke's telling us something about the sovereignty of Jesus over the lives of his followers that he's in control, whether the season is a tumultuous season or a comfortable season.

Jesus, we're in his hands. He's the king. And by the way, I hope you noticed last week that I resisted a very great preaching temptation of allegorizing the boat journey.

So I didn't say something like, you know, as you go through the storms of life, you know, and throw over the tackle, what tackle do you need to throw overboard your boat and what cargo do you need to throw off?

I didn't do that because that actually disrespects the Bible. That turns it into this kind of this Play-Doh thing for the preacher to play with and to form it in his own image. And every sermon you hear like that is completely different because it shows how arbitrary that way of allegorizing the Bible is.

[8 : 58] Now, every little detail in the journey is there because that's what happened. And Luke was there and they threw over the tackle. That's what they did. And they hoisted sails. That's what they did. It's not a symbol of anything.

It's just what happened. But I think that we could still say, though, the big picture is in the journey of the Christian life, Jesus is in control. He's in control. Whether we're, you know, I don't know, pardon the pun, you know, in the rough seas or smooth sailing.

The king, we're in the king's hands. So we're in good hands. In fact, Jesus said to Paul and to us early in the book of Acts, he said, we must go through many persecutions to enter the kingdom of God.

It's actually the promise of the Christian life given in the book of Acts is that it's going to be hard work. It's going to be tribulation. It's going to be suffering for the kingdom of God. And so we will all go through those times of our life.

Now, verse 14 goes on and as well as having believers in Petali, there's even a wider approach from the Christian church, which is very exciting.

[10:02] Verse 15, we came to Rome and then the believers from there, that is from Rome, when they heard of us, they came out to meet Paul. They came as far as the Forum of Appius and the three taverns to meet us.

So this is very encouraging for the apostle who's never been to Rome to preach the gospel. He's written a letter to Rome to the church there called the book of Romans and it's one of the great letters of the New Testament.

And in the letter, he says, you know, I haven't been there. I hope to visit you one day. I don't think he expected to visit in chains, but I'm sure Paul would be longing to see them. Did they get the letter to the Romans?

Did they like it? Were they encouraged by it? And so he's here in Petali and the church sends people to him to welcome him. It's very exciting.

And the actual word here, the believers, the NRSV tends to translate the word brothers as believers, but the word here is brothers.

[11:06] So Paul is saying he got here and the gospel got there first. He got to Rome and the family of God were already there.

The brothers in Christ, the sisters in Christ were already there ahead of him. And it's very exciting for Paul because he thinks, he's normally the pioneer church planter, but here the Lord Jesus, the kingdom of God that has no end, has already reached here ahead of him.

And Luke makes a very strong point at the end of verse 15, on seeing them, that is the brothers in Christ, Paul thanked God and Paul took courage.

Paul thanked God and Paul took courage. Because Paul has been pretty lonely at different points in this journey so far. And it's only here that Luke tells us Paul took courage.

Very interestingly, Jesus has already told Paul earlier, take courage. In a personal revelation, he said, take courage, you will definitely get to Rome.

[12:10] But it's only here when he reaches Rome and sees his brothers that that word from the Lord kind of sinks into his heart. Now, by the way, encouragement, we need to define this word.

We use the word encouragement wrongly. We use the word encouragement to mean you said something to me that made me feel good about myself. That was encouraging.

That's not how the Bible uses the word encouragement. The word encouragement in the Bible, biblical encouragement means to help someone take courage for Christ, to help someone take a stand for Christ.

Do you see the difference? Because you may speak to another Christian who may make you feel a bit guilty or bad about yourself in encouraging you in your faith, but it could still be encouragement because it helps you stand for Christ.

And so encouragement happens when you are pushed to stand for Christ, not just when you are made to feel good about yourself because you could easily be made to feel good about yourself and still be wimpy with regard to Christ, you see.

[13:13] So biblical encouragement is something stronger than just feeling good about yourself. And it's very interesting that Paul Luke tells us is encouraged in this biblical way when he sees the family of God, when he sees the church, when he sees his brothers in Christ.

So to take courage in Christ is not something that you can do on your own as an individual Christian. It's something that you need to do with the family of God, with the household of God. And this is a very strong teaching of the whole Bible. I mean, you need to think back to the very, very, very, very, very beginning of the Bible. Adam in the garden, he walks with God.

Adam is close to God. He has the word of God. He has God's company and face. And yet God says he's alone. He needs the family of God.

He needs a church. And really giving him a wife is really the first church. And so Adam had God but needed the church. Think about Moses.

[14:15] Moses was with God 40 days, 40 nights on the mountain, him and God one on one. And the Bible says literally Moses, because of that time with God, he glowed.

He came down literally, physically glowing. At one point, God offered to Moses and said, why don't we go one to one? Why don't we just start again one to one?

And what did Moses say? Moses said actually, no, I need this people. God, these are the people you redeem. These are the family, your family.

This is your church. These are the people that you promised to Abraham. And so even Moses sort of one on one to God was not enough. He wanted the people of God with him.

A final example, Elijah was a very strong prophet, but powerful in the word of God in the Old Testament. Also very depressed, suffered a lot for that word of God.

[15:15] And he was discouraged. He said to God, all your people have turned away. I'm the last one left and now they're trying to kill me. How did God encourage Elijah?

Did God say, well, you've got me, you know, it's you and me, we're here in the cave, you've got me. You know, God said, actually, you're not alone. I've got 7,000 who haven't bowed the knee to the pagan god Baal.

There are 7,000 who still worship me. You're not alone. So you see this theme in the Bible of even when you have God and you have the word of God, you need the people of God.

Do you see? I mean, some people have said to me in this church, and you've probably thought this, you've thought, if only the Lord Jesus would appear to me personally in a personal revelation in my own house or bedroom or something during my quiet time and say to me, you know, Wayne, keep up your courage or Doug, keep up your courage.

That's what I need to keep going. But actually, that's exactly what Paul had and Luke, Jesus appeared to Paul in a personal revelation and said, keep up your courage.

[16:26] But Luke says, it's only when he saw the brothers that he thanked God and took courage. Do you see? Are you greater than Adam? Are you greater than Moses? Are you greater than Elijah? Are you greater than the apostle Paul?

You will not stand strong in Christ. You will not take courage in Christ without your brothers and sisters in Christ, without the camaraderie and support of the family of God, the church.

Remember, we will suffer, but we will not suffer alone. Paul said, it's through many tribulations that we must enter the kingdom of God. Not I, but we.

We do it together. Well, Paul's now in Rome and he's given a house. He rents it. He seems to be given maybe some money from the church.

And he sort of sets up a kind of a preaching base in the house, even though he's a soldier there and he's under arrest. And he seems to be in legal limbo again.

[17:27] Rome doesn't really know what to do with him. So, there's nothing happening in the Roman end of justice. And so, he calls on his accusers, that is the Jews, of Rome and tries to sort out his legal situation.

And also, I think he wants to tell them about Jesus. So, verse 17, three days later, he called together the local leaders of the Jews. And when he assembled them, he says, this is a small group in his house of Jewish leaders.

And he gives them a summary of basically chapters 21 to 28 of Acts, of the trial. And he appeals to them as an Israelite, brothers, though I had done nothing against our people or the customs of our ancestors, yet I was arrested in Jerusalem and handed over to the Romans.

That's pretty much exactly what happened. That's a good summary. When they had examined me, the Romans wanted to release me because there was no reason for the death penalty in my case.

That's a good summary. Paul has been told that he is innocent from the Roman authorities.

But when the Jews objected, I was compelled to appeal to the emperor even though I had no charge to bring against my nation. A little hint there that Paul is saying he could have brought a charge against his accusers for their false accusation.

[18:45] He could have countersued but he didn't do that. Like Jesus, he didn't retaliate. He appealed to the emperor. For this reason, therefore, I have asked to see you today and speak with

you for since...

Now here's the gospel edge that Paul always gives. Since it is for the sake of the hope of Israel that I am bound with this chain. And we know what that hope is. It's the hope of Christmas, the hope given to Mary and to the shepherds, that there will be a king who will reign forever, who will be raised from the dead, exalted and who will sit on the throne of David.

That's the hope of Israel, the hope of Christmas. Paul's saying it's now happened here in Acts in the church and in Jesus. Now, as an aside, I just think it's very, very sweet that Paul, the lonely prisoner, that...

Well, the question is who's ready for him? Who's ready for him in Rome? The Roman authorities aren't ready for him. The Jews aren't ready for him because they say, they replied, verse 21, we will receive no letters from Judea about you and none of the brothers coming here has reported or spoken anything evil about you.

So the Jews haven't heard about him or the Romans. The only person who's ready for him are the church. Again, it's the great sovereignty of Jesus in kind of providentially guiding all these events. [20 : 12] he's really looking after his own apostle. Now, in Rome at the time, by the way, there's probably about 30,000 or 40,000 Jews living in Rome.

They lived in their own area of Rome mostly and well, they haven't heard of him so Paul thinks, okay, well, I'll share the gospel with you. It's what I do and so he offers to run a one-day seminar and verse 23, after they had set a day to meet with him, they came to him at his lodgings in great numbers.

So not just a small group of leaders but now a large number of people, maybe as many as you can fit into one house and from morning until evening for a whole day he explained the matter to them testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus from both the law of Moses and the prophets.

It's what Paul does well but it's what Jesus did when he rose from the dead. He explained why that had to happen from the Bible, from the Old Testament. It's what Paul does as well and similar to other parts of Acts there's two responses to Jesus and they're both very, very, very strong responses.

Some were convinced by what he said while others refused to believe. Very, very strong responses. So the word of God doesn't return empty.

[21 : 30] Some of them become followers of Jesus. That's a good thing. That's what they should do. I mean it's their hope. But others Luke says he doesn't say they didn't understand or they wanted more time or Paul wasn't clear.

Luke says they refused to believe. They didn't want to believe and we all know people like that today. They claim their questions haven't been answered but actually don't want to believe.

They refuse to believe. Paul has seen this hardness of heart before and Paul is actually not very tolerant of Israel's hardness of heart mostly because they've had 30 years to hear the gospel and they've heard of Christianity.

They've heard of it and the time's running out I think for Israel to believe and still be called Israel. Jesus himself made a promise, a prophecy that within one generation Jerusalem and the temple would be destroyed.

So Jesus himself sets the timeline of one generation which you would guess is about 40 years for Israel to receive him as their Lord lest they lose their status as Israel.

[22 : 44] And in nine years time, from this point, we're in about AD 60, 61, in nine years time under the divine hand of Jesus the Romans will come in and destroy the temple and destroy Jerusalem in AD 70.

So Paul is very impatient with them. He wants them to believe and they've had enough time to believe. They've had 30 years in the book of Acts to worship Jesus. And it's been an amazing 30 years.

I mean you think about where we've been in the book of Acts in that 30 years from Jesus' ascension in chapter 1, the day of Pentecost in chapter 2, the birth and growth of the amazing Jerusalem church, the first deacons, the first martyr in Stephen, the spreading out of the church under persecution, the church grows and grows and grows, the great conversion of Saul who is now Paul, the gospel going to Cornelius, remember that in Acts 10 when the first non-Jews are allowed into the kingdom of God.

That's a great event in Cornelius and his household. The first missionary teams have gone and been sent out, churches have been planted across modern day Turkey and modern day Eastern Europe as well as North Africa, lives have been transformed, communities have been impacted, a lot of great things have happened under the reign of Jesus for the last 30 years and so for Paul that's long enough in speaking to his fellow Israelites so he gives them this final warning and this is a really, really scary warning I think.

He says the Holy Spirit was right in saying to your ancestors through the prophet Isaiah so before Paul said our ancestors did this and our ancestors did that, now he says this warning is for you and your ancestors, that is the hardened Israelites and quotes Isaiah 6, a very famous chapter that Jesus himself quoted about judgment and hardness of heart.

[24 : 49] Isaiah said go to this people and say you will indeed listen but never understand, you will indeed look but never perceive, that is you know you could tell them all day and they'll pretend to listen but they're not listening, they're not listening.

For this people's heart has grown dull and their ears are hard of hearing, they have shut their eyes so they may not look with their eyes and listen with their ears and understand with their heart and turn and I would heal them.

let it be known then, says Paul, to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles, to the nations, to the non-Jews and they will listen.

There comes a time for Paul that you've had enough time to hear the gospel and if you've got a heart in your heart, God will even take away the opportunity of hearing the gospel and repentance. It's a very stern warning. It doesn't mean by the way that this is the end of ministry to Jews because the early church for several hundred years kept evangelising Jews with quite significant success actually but in terms of salvation history I think Paul is drawing out that your time of being the unique nation, of being God's treasured possession, that's coming to an end and the gospel is for now for all nations.

[26 : 10] So it's sort of tragic and triumphant because it's triumphant because the kingdom of God will have no end, it's going to go everywhere now but it's tragic because there's a group of God's own people who are hardened to it.

And finally are the final two verses of the book of Acts, a bit of an anticlimax I think actually. Paul lived there two whole years at his own expense and welcomed all who came to him proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance. that's the end of the book. It's kind of an open ending. By mentioning two years we know from other sources that Paul was probably actually released after two years and then re-arrested a little bit later and then beheaded under Nero.

It may have been that Luke wanted to publish Acts before that happened. I suspect more likely is that Luke didn't want to be too focused on Paul but he wanted to be focused on Jesus and the kingdom of God.

So he ends at this point even though he knows this extra stuff happens because he doesn't want it to be about Paul the martyr but that would be glorious and it is glorious. He wants it to be about the kingdom of God and the kingdom of God hasn't been mentioned that much in the book of Acts until this verse but then the kingdom of God is mentioned heaps in Luke's gospel.

[27 : 37] Heaps at the first Christmas. Heaps when Jesus arrived on the scene and said the kingdom of God is near. Heaps when Jesus went to the first synagogue himself and read Isaiah and sort of said this is now being fulfilled in your hearing.

So for Luke he's really saying a couple of things. He's saying it's not about Paul it's about Jesus. It's about the kingdom of Jesus that was given the first Christmas the hope of Israel and he's saying the job is unfinished.

Paul does his preaching without hindrance and boldness and that is what Luke's readers are meant to be doing in the first century. That is what the church is meant to keep on doing is to continue the preaching of Jesus as Lord and Saviour and spread the kingdom of God.

I think what we're meant to see is that there's a real continuity between the Bibles in terms of the old covenant to the promises given to Mary and Joseph and shepherds to the arrival of Jesus and his own life and death and resurrection and then that kingdom he goes to the right hand of God and then works in the power of the spirit through his church through his people especially through the proclamation of his kingship of the gospel.

So there's a real continuity from Old Testament Christmas Acts and then you can just see it going on dot dot dot into the church of the second century the third century the fourth century the fifth century it's one unbroken chain of the kingdom of God of the reign of Jesus it really is happening you will not read about it in the media but it really is happening and although in any particular place there are ebbs and flows maybe the overall effect is one of growth the overall effect is one that the kingdom of God of Jesus is unstoppable and it's undeniable and it's also unfinished and I think Luke ends the book this way so that that is handed to us of the church of this age to keep telling the world about the Lord Jesus I mean we haven't really got to the ends of the earth have we Jesus said go to the ends of the earth but in Acts they've got to the capital of the ends of the earth Rome but there's actually nations to go to and just as he spent three months off on Malta preaching the gospel to sort of natives if you like there are many many islands and places around the world where there's people like that that need to hear about

[30 : 09] Jesus and they are hearing about Jesus that is happening but we need to continue this work of mission this work of kingdom this work of gospel proclamation so that the kingdom will have no end and every knee will get a chance and every knee will bow so friends I'm going to pray for us I'm going to commit our lives as a church that we would encourage each other to stand for Jesus and there may be some here by the way who really aren't clear on their own personal relationship with Jesus and aren't sure that he is their lord aren't sure that they're forgiven so I'm going to pray for you as well you would take this moment to enter the kingdom and accept him as your lord and saviour so if that's you please pray that prayer with me as well let's pray lord Jesus we honour you and we praise you for your wonderful arrival that first Christmas but also for your death and resurrection and subsequent reign and your kingdom that has no end lord Jesus thank you that it continues in acts and continues down to our very day lord Jesus I pray for anyone here who is not sure whether their sins are forgiven whether they are in your kingdom that they would take this moment now to ask you for forgiveness and accept you as their king and father for each of us I pray that we as a church together will herald to the world the good news that you have died for our sins and are our risen king forever to reign never to be stopped and you'll one day return to judge so lord Jesus we commit to you our role in that kingdom amen