

The Gospel Preached

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[0 : 00] Well, you can see from your Bibles that Acts has an ending and we we are at the end.

Acts 28. And I just want to give you a little bit of a warning. Next week in the following week, we're doing Acts 1 and Acts 2. And it's because of Ascension and Pentecost.

But don't be alarmed. We're not doing it all over again. I promise you we're stopping on Pentecost, which is May 23rd. This has been this has been a very good series.

It's been a series in which we're seeing what God wants for his church. We're seeing what God's agenda is for the world. We are strengthened because of the power of the gospel to overcome all kinds of obstacles to transform people's lives, to bring them from darkness into the glorious light of Jesus Christ.

And so it is a it is a sermon series that is about shaping our church in every church that loves the Lord Jesus Christ.

[1 : 10] The great thing about Acts 28 is that Paul finally reaches his destination. He finally reaches Rome. It's been his heart's desire.

And we hear in his letter to the Romans, which he wrote about three years earlier, that here is what is on his heart. He said, without ceasing, I mentioned you Christians in Rome, always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God's will, I may now at last succeed in coming to you.

And he has succeeded and he succeeded through lots of obstacles from riots and arrest and trials before corrupt governors and a king through a hurricane, through shipwreck, through a snake bite. He has finally arrived and come to the place where he has been longing to come, the center of the world, really, of the known world at that time.

And the great thing is, is that the last stage of Paul's journey is clear sailing. So if you see this on the front of your bulletin, you see how he goes from Malta all the way up through.

[2 : 27] He's got a great south wind and he puts in at Puteoli, which is there on the coast of Italy. And a wonderful thing happens when he finally sets foot in Italy there.

Because Christians in Puteoli give hospitality to Paul and to Luke. By the way, Luke is with him. He's talking about we. He's a firsthand account here.

And these Christians give hospitality not only to Paul and Luke, but to the guards and to the crew, the people who were on the ship as well. And they stay there for a week.

And then on their way up to Rome, if you look there from Puteoli, Forum of Appius and Three Taverns, he meets up with Christians from Rome itself.

And if you look at Luke 15, Luke says, and he says, And the brethren there, when they heard of us, came as far as the Forum of Appius and the Three Taverns to meet us.

[3 : 28] And on seeing them, Paul thanked God and took courage. And that's Luke's way of saying Paul was overcome with joy. He was so thankful and encouraged to see these people.

And it wasn't just because he is receiving an unexpected welcome. It is because they are people who have been transformed by the gospel.

The same gospel that he has been preaching. And seeing them brings this wonderful fact home to him that the light of the gospel has come in to the city of Rome.

Jesus has given these people new life. It means that God has been creating a church in Rome for years now. And that deep connection that Paul had with them, this immediate recognition that we are part of the people of God together in Jesus Christ, is something that Christians experience often when they meet other Christians from different parts of the world.

There is this deep connection and relationship that is not natural. It is a connection that overcomes economic differences, cultural differences, language differences.

[4 : 41] And it is something that the Holy Spirit has given because he has brought people into the family of God through Jesus Christ. And you may have experienced this before in your life.

I have as well. It's a remarkable thing. And that experience is a powerful reminder of what we've seen throughout Acts. That God overcomes every barrier with his good news of Jesus. Whether it is culture or language or education or geography or economic status. And so what Paul has come to is he has come to his people, the people of God, even though he doesn't recognize them at first.

They are strangers. Paul has come to that church to strengthen it, to strengthen the work of the gospel in Rome and to make the gospel clear and teach so that this huge city will be changed, will be deeply affected by God's word.

We should know that Rome was a massive city. It was well over a million people. No other city in the world came even close to that.

[5 : 49] And it would be hundreds and hundreds of years before another city that large was in the world. People from all over the world came to Rome.

And that meant that very different cultures and religions and even languages, people lived there. It was a place of great wealth and beauty and incredible learning.

But because it was this huge, sprawling city, it also had massive social problems. And it had deprivation of every kind in that city.

Just about every kind of human condition could be found there. But the great thing is that Paul comes into that city with great confidence. He knows that the gospel is universal.

He knows that it is powerful to bring transformation to people of any human condition. And so Rome is the perfect place to proclaim Jesus.

[6 : 46] That's why in that earlier letter to the Romans that we have in our Bibles, he said this. He said, I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone.

There is this universal power of God's salvation and his gospel. To everyone who believes, to the Jew first and to the Greek. Now, if this is true for Rome, it is true for us here in multicultural, pluralistic Vancouver.

The gospel is well suited for our city. We, like Rome, have extreme wealth and we have desperate poverty. We have people of many different religions.

We have people of different languages. We have a whole range of people in our city. Yet the gospel transcends all of this. And the Holy Spirit tells us through Paul this morning that we ought to be confident in the gospel.

Not to be ashamed of it. But to be open about it in the city. Because it is relevant by the power of the Holy Spirit to every person that we could possibly meet here.

[7 : 57] Now, Paul, as he comes with this ministry of the gospel, shows us two important things of the gospel that I want to point out. Because it's helpful for us as we carry this treasure of the gospel into our own city of Vancouver.

The first is in verse 20. And I just want to give you a little bit of a background to what he says in verse 20. Paul wants to start preaching the gospel to the Jews first in Rome.

Because they know God's word well. If the whole community understands that Jesus is the fulfillment of God's word.

Of all that was in the Old Testament. If that happens, it is a wonderful jumping off place for the work of the gospel in Rome. And so he tells them that he is innocent of any wrongdoing against the Jewish faith and the people.

In fact, he says, I am actually here in chains because of the hope of Israel in verse 20. That's why I have these chains.

[9 : 03] Not because I've rejected the Jewish faith. But because my message is about the hope of Israel. Well, what is that hope? Very simply, the hope of Israel is that God would establish an everlasting kingdom.

And that the Messiah, the anointed one, would be that king. He would rule their people. Listen to what one of the prophets, Ezekiel, says. It's in Ezekiel 37.

Ezekiel 37 is wonderful. It's about the renewal of the people of God. It's about resurrection. And it's about what God has in store for his people. He says this, verse 24 of chapter 37.

My servant David shall be king over them, and they shall all have one shepherd. And I'm going to make a covenant of peace with them. It will be an everlasting covenant with them.

And I will set them in their land and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary in their midst forever. My dwelling place will be with them. I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

[10:10] And then the nations will know that I am the Lord who sanctifies Israel when my sanctuary is in their midst forever. Well, we know the good news.

We have been hearing it in Acts. And clearly, Jesus fulfills this hope because he is God with us. He is our shepherd, and he is our king.

And as Ezekiel says, he brings us peace with God. He does it through the forgiveness of sins and through repentance. And the result of that is that Jesus rules us now here on earth.

He dwells in us, and he sanctifies us by the Holy Spirit. It is a relationship that doesn't end in death, but it is eternal.

It is by the gift of the resurrection of our bodies. That is how he dwells with us forever. And that language of everlasting eternity in Ezekiel is fulfilled in this.

[11:10] This is the hope, the hope of the kingdom of God, the fulfillment of God's promises that the Jewish people longed for. Paul is saying, that's what my message is about.

And that's why when Paul spent the whole day with all the Jewish leaders in verse 23, here's what he said. He says, if you look there in 23, it's on the next page.

When they had appointed a day for him to come, they came at his lodging in great numbers, and he expounded the matter to them from morning till evening, testifying to the kingdom of God, and trying to convince them about Jesus, both from the law of Moses and from the prophets.

Jesus has brought this kingdom that Ezekiel has promised. He has brought it here and now. Now, those leaders who were there in great numbers, I think, must have wondered a bit at what Paul was talking about, because we know there was a back and forth that took place all day.

It was an interactive sermon. It wasn't just somebody standing up there for 20 minutes and people listening. And one of the things that would have been asked about and would have seemed awfully strange is that here Paul is talking about the kingdom of God coming now in Jesus, and yet he is in chains.

[12:29] He is under house arrest in the capital of the most powerful empire in the world. And he's waiting to be judged by the king, by Caesar himself. So they must have thought and said, if you are in God's kingdom, Paul, why do things look so unimpressive?

Why are you in this state of being a prisoner? And I'd like you to turn to Acts 26, just real quickly. And that's on page 139.

In Acts 26, 18, Paul is talking to Agrippa. And he is telling him what the message is that Jesus has given to him.

Listen to what he says. In verse 17, I will appear to you, delivering you from the people and from the Gentiles to whom I send you. And what is your message?

What are you going to be doing, Paul? Jesus says, to open their eyes, that they may turn from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.

[13:46] In other words, what the kingdom of God is about is the gospel, the power of the gospel, turning people from darkness to light, and powerfully taking people from under the power of Satan to the power of God, and giving them the forgiveness of their sins and a new place, a place in the kingdom of God where they are sanctified by faith in Jesus Christ.

This is the nature of the kingdom. It means people are a new people with a new king. And that is what Paul's message is. It's not a political kingdom.

But unfortunately, it is something that is unseen. And this is why we see at the end of that little section in chapter 28, verse 24, some were convinced by what he said, while others disbelieved.

And this was something that must have been disappointing for Paul. His great hope was that everyone would be converted to this, would understand this.

But it is unseen, this kingdom, in many ways. It requires faith to see. And that's why what happened is that they walked away disagreeing. And the disappointment comes out because Paul says one statement to them in verse 25.

[15:11] Luke tells us what that statement is. It's a very powerful one. It's from Isaiah. It's something that Jesus himself talked about in the Gospels as well when there was rejection of Jesus. He said this.

The Holy Spirit was right in saying to your fathers through Isaiah the prophet, Go to this people and say, You shall indeed hear, but never understand. And you shall indeed see, but never perceive. For this people's heart has grown dull, and their ears are heavy of hearing. Their eyes, they have closed. Lest they should perceive with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and turn to me to heal them.

Let it be known to you then that the salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles. They will listen. And this is the second thing about the Gospel.

It is about Jesus coming with his kingdom, about his rule that is extended every time people come into the loving rule of Jesus Christ in power. But there is a second thing about the Gospel, and that is that it can be rejected.

[16:16] Even though Jesus is king, he can be ignored. It's very possible not to turn to him. And Isaiah says, Even those people who know most about God, who have God's word, the Jewish people, they can hear and not understand.

They can see and never perceive that Jesus Christ is God's fulfillment, the king who saves us. And isn't it amazing as we look at Acts that God overcomes hurricanes and shipwrecks and snakebites and corrupt officials and riots and so forth.

But there is a bigger obstacle. And that bigger obstacle at the end of Acts is the heart of people. What is in the heart and the mind of people.

That is the biggest obstacle. And throughout Luke and Acts, we see that pattern that even though many are transformed by the Gospel, many reject Christ as well.

It's what happened in Christ's own ministry as well. And I think that this is an important word for the church. It's important for each of us to hear. Because if people reject Jesus and reject the Gospel that Paul preaches, this doesn't surprise God.

[17:32] He knows that it will happen. He said it will. And it should not surprise us as well. Our job, according to Acts, is to persevere. It is to keep sharing God's word.

Because when people do perceive with their ears, perceive with their eyes and hear with their ears, understand with their hearts the word of God, they are healed, Isaiah tells us.

Their relationship with God is healed. Their relationship with other people is healed. Their bodies will be healed in the resurrection as well. And even now, God brings deep healing of many kinds through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

And this makes the risk of rejection all worthwhile. We expect rejection. But we expect God to powerfully work through his Gospel as well.

Now, verse 27 says, That warning about what happens when the Gospel is preached is not just for others. It is also directed towards us as well.

[18:37] Because we, as God's people, can have hearts that grow dull as well. Our ears can become hard of hearing spiritually. We can close the eyes of our hearts to the truth that God gives us in his word.

That's a spiritual danger we all face. We have the word just as the Jews did. It's a great gift to us. Yet we must be attentive to God as he speaks.

And that is God himself who is speaking. We look to him as the one whose Holy Spirit speaks to us in the Gospel. And that's why our times of Bible reading and praying to God, our times of listening to sermons and receiving Holy Communion are so very, very important for us.

Because these are times when our hearts are warmed towards Jesus. When the vision of our eyes are cleared, the cataracts of sin and misunderstanding are surgically removed.

It's a time when we can hear Jesus call us by name to follow him. It is a time when God renews us and heals us through his word, through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

[19:50] And we all need that. That's why it's important we're here this morning. Now, God, in a wonderful way, as we close this section, and I want to close with this, what he does is he overrules the rejection that takes place.

And we see in verse 28 that he immediately sends Paul to the Gentiles. And God promises him this, that they will listen. And then in, this doesn't mean that he writes off the Jews, but God here widens Paul's preaching and the vision of his ministry to include all of Rome immediately.

And I love the way that Acts ends in verse 30. It says that Paul lived in Rome two whole years at his own expense. And here's what he did. He welcomed all who came to him.

And the way he did it was by preaching the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ quite openly and unhindered. This is an open-ended way to finish Acts. It says that the gospel is going forward unhindered. We don't know what's going to happen to Paul. It's not a biography. It's actually an account of the gospel and the progress of that gospel. And what you see in this time is the time of continuous hospitality for Paul, even though he's chained to a Roman soldier, 24 hours a day.

[21 : 17] And what he does in his ministry is he expresses the deepest form of welcome by not only physically receiving every person warmly, but also by welcoming them with the word of God.

He preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus. In other words, he constantly explained how Jesus welcomes everyone into his kingdom and calls them to know the incredible blessings of that kingdom as they repent and turn to him as their Lord and Savior.

It's a time when Paul's freedom is limited, but the freedom of the gospel is unhindered. And I think that that verse, Paul's life, those two years, is a model for the church.

It's a very good challenge that we go away from this passage with for our church at St. John's, but also for each of us individually as well. Because our preaching and our teaching, our ministry of Jesus, ought always be in the form of welcome.

God wants us to warmly receive everyone he welcomes because we want the very best for them. And the gospel is what gives the very best for each person in our city.

[22 : 32] We want them to be healed by Jesus as they turn to him in repentance. We want them to know the blessings of the kingdom of God with us. And the extraordinary thing is that Paul, his hospitality encompasses the whole city of Rome, from Jew to pagan Gentile, from the very powerful to the most marginalized in Rome.

That's what it means when he said he welcomed all. And I think in a way that his chains made his ministry more effective for those who were on the fringe of society as well.

They would have found it easier to approach him. And they would have understood that he is coming from a position of humility with something that is wonderful and great. And so I think the challenge of Acts for us and this passage is to humbly widen our embrace of our own city.

And there is some risk in this. It's a call to welcome people into your life who are very different from you. It's a call to welcome those who you assume are very resistant to believing Jesus.

It's a call to welcome those who are hurting and can't offer you anything. And this is the message of Acts, that the church should persevere in this hospitality, hospitality to whole cities, and to welcome them in the name of Jesus Christ.

[23 : 55] No matter what the obstacle is to God's word, Acts says persevere. And Jesus will bless and transform people through that word.

He is faithful to it. And I also want to say that he's faithful to his people. Through all that Paul went through, Jesus himself upheld him and loved him and sustained him and led him.

Jesus does that for us as well. He loves you. He upholds you. He leads you as you serve him as his minister, as his missionary in the city of Vancouver.

Amen. Please kneel for prayer.

Amen. Father, we thank you for this wonderful spring day. And we thank you for moms.

[25 : 00] We thank you for all mothers, whether biological, step or foster, who give their best to nurture, often with great sacrifice, the children entrusted to them.

We thank you for their love, their generosity of spirit, and their unending work. And we especially thank you for those moms who have given their children the great gift of knowing and loving you. We ask that you will bless them, succor them, replenish them. Lord, in your mercy. Unfortunately, Mother's Day is not a universally happy day.

While most of us have had outstanding mothers, others have survived an abusive situation and never really known a mother's love.

We pray that you will heal those lasting hurts with the glory of your love and that you will bring all children from such situations to know you.

[26 : 07] As well, some of us grieve for mothers who have died recently and find their loss unbearable on a day when mothers are so honored.

Soothe that grief, we ask. Heal the loneliness. And we ask as well for mothers whose children were conceived through acts of force, particularly those women in Africa where such conceptions are a routine part of the insanity of war.

Heal all those mothers' trauma, we ask. Help them to love their children as you love them. Give them your peace. Help them to find the joy that comes from knowing and loving you. Lord, in your mercy. And there's one last group of women we pray for this bright, shiny morning. We pray especially for the sisters in our congregation who yearn or have yearned to nurture their own babies, to see their own children grow up in grace and knowledge of you.

[27 : 23] But you, however, have called them to a single life. Father, we ask on this Mother's Day a special blessing for these, our sisters.

Show them, we ask, the unique role that you have planned for them and be with them as they help grow your kingdom. On a day when they have no earthly chance of being honored, we ask that you will give them serenity, joy, and a real sense of purpose.

Lord, in your mercy. Father, we pray for all of us who share your gospel.

But particularly this morning, we pray for Richie Spidal of Navigators, Kirsten Rumery of Living Waters, Jeremy Curry who labors in India, Nepal, and Erica and Jess Cantillon in Jerusalem.

Keep them safe and invigorate them as they do your work. And we pray as well for the beloved sick members of our family, Ken and Gail, David, Rosemary, and Rowena.

[28 : 43] May they feel your healing in their lives and know beyond a shadow of a doubt that they are loved by you and by us. And lastly, Father, help us remember this day that all love comes from you and that the gratitude we give mothers is a pale reflection of what is due to you.

We love you. We thank you for everything in our lives and to you be all honor and glory. Your kingdom come. Amen.