

Acts 28:17-31, No. 54
“The Blessing of the World”
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We come this morning to the end of the Book of Acts. If you are interested, this is the fifty-fourth sermon in the series. In some ways, of course, as we will see, the book ends *in medias res*. There is no ending in the sense that there is no closure to the story that Luke has been telling in such detail over the past eight chapters. As the book concludes Paul’s legal situation is on-going and we haven’t learned what the outcome will be. The book, in that sense is open-ended. That perhaps has contributed to several movements in recent years that have taken the name *Acts 29*, suggesting that they see themselves as picking up the threads of Luke’s interrupted story. One such *Acts 29* group, composed of ex-Campus Crusade staffers, eventually joined the Orthodox Church. Another, very much with us today, is a world-wide network of church planters. The use of the name *Acts 29* reminds us that the church has always understood that Acts is the beginning of the story, not the end, and that the history of the ministry of the Apostle Paul, in particular, was always understood to be a paradigm for Christians to imitate, necessary changes being made. Whether Luke had such thoughts as he finished his story in the way he did who can say?

Text Comment

- v.17 Even in Rome and even this late in his ministry Paul still followed his old strategy of meeting first with the Jewish community. Perhaps it was particularly important that he do so on this occasion insofar as Paul would have assumed that, given the traffic between Palestine and Rome, these Jews would have heard of Paul’s arrest and his incarceration in Caesarea.

- v.18 The “they” who wanted to free Paul were those Jews of the Pharisaic party who had stood up for Paul at his appearance before the Sanhedrin when Paul turned his examination into a test-case for belief in the resurrection (23:9). The point is that it was Jews who wanted to set him free. Paul is protesting his innocence as a Jew to Jews.

- v.20 Once again Paul makes the point he has made many times before: a Jew loyal to the Scriptures, a Jew who understands the Law and the Prophets, will be, must be a Christian.

- v.22 As it happened these Jews knew less about what had happened in Judea than Paul had surmised.

- v.23 He had given this argument so many times before that no doubt at this late date it was polished beautifully. No doubt he knew what their questions would be, having heard the Jews ask their questions so many times before, and so he would have anticipated them in his presentation. I think I heard Francis Schaeffer give his famous set of lectures – the lectures that were eventually published in the two books *Escape from Reason* and *The God Who Is There* – four times and they were the same all four times. Those lecture contained the argument he wished to make and so he repeated them.

- v.24 It is probably safe to assume that a large majority did not believe, which is why Paul was prompted to conclude his presentation as he did.
- v.27 If you remember, the Lord had used this same text from Isaiah 6 in regard to his own ministry to the Jews and not just once (Matt. 13:14-15; John 12:39-40).
- v.31 That Acts ends without reporting the outcome of Paul's legal case almost certainly indicates that when Luke had finished writing his book Paul was still in Rome awaiting events. Had matters been concluded Luke would certainly have reported the fact.

We know from other evidence that Paul did not remain in custody. In one way or another he obtained his freedom and recommenced his itinerant ministry. Tradition records that he made his way westward to Spain, as he had told the Romans he had hopes of doing in his letter to them written several years before. Clement, writing late in the first century, says that Paul "reached the limit of the west" (*Letter 5:1-7*). He also was again in Ephesus and Macedonia, as we learn in 1 Timothy and he visited Crete, as we learn in Titus. He was later arrested again and this time imprisoned in Rome, not placed under house arrest, and it was from there, several years after this that he wrote his last letter, 2 Timothy. He was executed in Rome, as was Peter, both victims of the persecution of Christians under Nero (A.D. 64/65).

Two omissions in Luke's concluding chapter have long been noticed. Perhaps you noticed them as we read these verses: things we might well have expected Luke to mention, given his obvious interest in these matters over the past chapters and as one of Paul's Gentile aides.

First, he says nothing about Paul's interactions with the Christians in Rome, with what must have now been a substantial church and a church to which he had already written his greatest letter. In that letter, if you remember, he spoke warmly of his eagerness to meet these believers and he asked them if they would be willing to help him on his way westward; he had, he said, hopes of preaching and teaching as far west as Spain. We know the relationship between the apostle and the Roman church was cordial and fruitful. We had a hint of that last time in v. 15, where we read that some of the church's leaders traveled as far as 44 miles south of the city simply to greet the apostle as he made his way northward to Rome. *Instead all the emphasis in this final section of Luke's narrative falls on Paul's interaction with the Jewish community in Rome.*

Second, nothing is said about the course of his legal proceedings. Through chapter after chapter in the final section of the book, almost a third of the whole, we have been treated to every thrust and parry as the Jewish leadership sought Paul's conviction and as he mounted his defense. His appeal to Caesar, which finally brought him to Rome, was one of those legal maneuvers. And now, at the end...nothing. Perhaps nothing happened in those first two years. We are, ourselves, after all, only too familiar with how slowly, how infuriatingly slowly the wheels can turn in our own legal system. Perhaps Luke had nothing to report.

But he must also have been reaching the end of the scroll and perhaps wished to write more than the space available would permit. For example, it has been pointed out that the end of Luke's Gospel is somewhat similar in its disappointing lack of detail. In Luke 24 – remember, The Gospel of Luke is the longest book in the New Testament – one reads of the Lord's resurrection appearances and the Lord's further dealings with his disciples during what we know from the other Gospels was a period of 40 days. But Luke tells the story as if all of it happened in a day or two and all in the environs of Jerusalem. Luke compressed his material to fit his scroll and he had space to make only the points that he felt most important to make. He didn't take the time to tell the whole story. He wanted to finish his account of the aftermath of the resurrection with what he took to be the most important points.

Well, apparently the same is true here in Acts 28. It is perfectly obvious, as we read through this final paragraph of the book, that the key point in Luke's conclusion is *the rejection of the Gospel by the Jews*. That is what this final paragraph is all about. It is striking and important that in v. 19 Paul refers to the group that opposed him in Jerusalem as "the Jews." After all, he was a Jew, many of his compatriots in the Christian church were Jews, and the primary leadership of the church was still the company of the apostles, all of whom were Jews. In fact, as he said in v. 18, even those who were clamoring for him to be released, members of the party of the Pharisees, were, of course, Jews. And yet Paul seems to be saying that the Jews as a class, as a people, were now confirmed as the enemies of the Christian faith. Individual Jewish believers, of which there were many, could not offset the rejection of Jesus by the Jewish people as a whole.

Then Luke makes a point of 1) our hearing Paul explain both his own situation and the truth about Jesus *to the Jews* – probably the leadership of the Jewish community is meant – 2) we listen in as he quotes Isaiah regarding the intransigent unbelief of the ancient people of God, and 3) he has us watch them turn their backs on Paul and walk away. Then, lest we miss the emphasis that is being placed on this last interaction between Paul and the Jews, the final words of Paul recorded in Acts are his statement that, in effect, he was done with the Jews and now would concentrate on Gentile evangelism and church planting.

Now, to be sure, all of this needs to be balanced with what we know to have been the strength of Paul's feelings for his people. He told the Romans, for example,

"I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh." [9:3]

That is an extraordinarily powerful statement from someone who loved Christ and who appreciated his salvation as passionately as did the Apostle Paul. More than this, the rejection of the Jews on Paul's part needs also to be balanced with his teaching, as we have it in Romans 11, that God is not done with his ancient people and that in due time he will return to them and save them.

"Lest you be wise in your own sight, I want you to understand this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, *until* the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And in this way all Israel will be saved..." [11:25-26]

What a mystery the Jews are! What a remarkable people and what a remarkable history! How do we explain the Jews apart from what we are taught in the Word of God? So blessed a people, so capable, so influential! There are some 14 million Jews in the world today. They represent something less than 2 tenths of 1 percent of the world's population. You know, don't you, that Jews – though they represent the tiniest fraction of the world's population, a tiny fraction of the highly educated, western world's population, a small fraction of university professors, scientists, and political leaders – according to a recent tabulation have won 22% of all Nobel prizes. They have won 41% of all the prizes in economics, 28% of those awarded in medicine, 26% in physics, 19% in chemistry, 13% in literature, and, if you can believe it, 9% of the Nobel peace prizes.

But what suffering they have endured! Pogroms too many to count from the first century to our own, some of them atrocities so vile and so immense that they have come to be the principal historical illustrations of the darkness that lurks in the human heart. If you want to know the evil that human beings are capable of, just think of what men have done to the Jews. Surely, as the Bible says so pointedly and repeatedly, they occupy a special place in this world precisely because they occupy a special place in the heart of God, a place of both salvation and judgment. Remember what the Lord said to his people through Amos the prophet:

“You only have I chosen of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your sins.” [3:2]

Frederick the Great is said to have once asked his court chaplain, “Herr Professor, give me a proof of the Bible, but briefly, for I have little time.” The chaplain answered, “Majesty, the Jews!” Think of the particular, the unusual, even the irrational contempt that has been directed at them through the ages, by all sorts of people. There's nothing like this anywhere else in human history. Voltaire once asked: “Why should the world be made to rotate around the insignificant pimple of Jewry?” Why indeed? Why should the holocaust be the defining event of the 20th century? Why should the conflict in the Middle East, which in so many ways is a conflict with the Jews at its center, continue to be one of the principal threats to the modern world's political order even though that part of the world represents a very small part of the world's population? Why should anti-Semitism surface and re-surface even in the most sophisticated of societies, even in those societies, like ours, that owe so much to the contribution of Jews? Why should this ancient people – alone among all such ancient people – have not only preserved their race, but be restored to their ancient land in our own time? Paul Johnson, in his classic history of the modern world, *Modern Times*, explains that “Israel slipped into existence through a crack in the time continuum.” [485] It is true! It is hard to imagine that the state of Israel could have been formed at any other moment in modern history than 1948, under any other circumstances than those utterly unusual ones that prevailed at that precise moment in international politics, and never again.

Now, I don't believe that any of this is prophesied in the Bible, as many Christians have claimed – the many Nobel prizes or even the return to the nationhood in 1948 – but surely all of this is far easier to explain if one believes the Bible and so believes that the Jews matter to God in a unique way and that their present unbelief and future prospects are of special interest to him!

That at one and the same time, he cares for them and keeps them under his judgment. You remember, of course, that the Lord's plan, as Paul had been taught that plan, was that the gospel would go to the Jews first and then to the Gentiles. And that had been Paul's strategy from the beginning. He always began in the synagogue when he came to a new town or city. The first Christians in a place were typically Jews and they then helped Paul in the evangelization of Gentiles.

But we also know that the story of Acts was organized around the Lord's promise to his disciples, before his Ascension to heaven, that they would be his witnesses first in Jerusalem, in all Judea, in Samaria, and to the end of the earth. That calling not only put the Jewish people first, it meant, inevitably, that the small population of Jewish Christians would eventually be overwhelmed by the number of Gentile believers. That would have been true even if the Jews had responded in faith, but, of course, most of them did not. Most not only rejected the message of Jesus as the Messiah and the Savior of the world, but became active enemies of the Christian movement. We have seen that animosity played out in this last section of Acts as the Jews did their best to see Paul condemned and punished by the Roman state, a state that had only too often condemned and oppressed them.

Why did the Jews turn their backs on Jesus, whether during his own ministry or that of his apostles? Well we have here three explanations, all of which are true and all important. The first is that the prophets had long prophesied the apostasy of the chosen people and the history of their response to Jesus was the fulfillment of that prophecy. Second, their hearts were hard and had become impervious to repentance. There is such a thing in the life of the human soul or of a people as the point of no return and the Jews, as a people, had reached it. They were, as the great Puritan John Owen described the condition, "sermon proof and sickness proof." And third, God was judging them for the long, dismal history of their hardness of heart and their rejection of his covenant. He was refusing to intervene to save them by granting them repentance and faith because he had lost his patience with them. How those different explanations of the Jews' unbelief relate to one another is, of course, a mystery, but that all three are true is unassailable fact, for these are the reasons always given for unbelief in the Bible: unbelief is what the Scripture predicts of the human heart, it is the expression of man's natural rebellion against God, and it is the judgment of God who refuses to overcome it by his power.

To be sure, many Jews did believe and were saved – there had always been a remnant of believing folk even in the darkest periods of Israel's unbelief – and there are many Jewish Christians today, though they remain a tiny fraction of the total Jewish population. Such is the discriminating grace of God. Such it has always been. But as the Jews turned away from the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Gentile age well and truly began. From this point forward evangelism among the Jews would reap diminishing returns and the church of Jesus Christ would become increasingly Gentile. There would always continue to be Jewish Christians – think of such prominent Jewish Christians as the composer Felix Mendelssohn, the biblical scholar Alfred Edersheim, the British politician Benjamin Disraeli, the philosopher Simone Weil, the Romanian pastor and sufferer under the Communist regime Richard Wurmbrand, and the physician Bernard Nathanson, once a leader in the movement to legalize abortion and later an evangelical spokesman for the pro-life movement –, there would even continue to be some communities of Jewish Christians – think of *Jews for Jesus* in our own time – but as time passed the distinctively

Jewish Christian element in the church declined and, while never entirely disappearing did become a fringe element in an otherwise almost entirely Gentile church. Paul's remark here at the end of Acts explains that phenomenon very clearly. And, interestingly and importantly, given the text we have read, there has not been since the time of the Apostle Paul a great turning of Jews to Christ. There have been many Christian revivals over the ages, surges of new Christians, but never among the Jews.

So if you would understand the history of salvation and the philosophy of human history taught us in the Word of God, you must appreciate that we have reached a significant turning point at the end of Acts. Such a turning point was the calling of Abraham and the beginning of God's program of forming a community of faith out of his descendants. And now we come to another turning point, as the gospel begins to radiate outward from Jerusalem to the four corners of the world, leaving the Jewish people largely behind. This was always the divine plan, of course. Abraham had been told that all the nations of the earth would be blessed through his descendants and the prophets repeatedly speak of a time when the knowledge of the Lord will cover the earth as the waters cover the sea and when the kings of the earth will come to Jerusalem to worship, beautiful images of God's covenant with Israel expanding to comprehend the entire human race.

If you were Luke, Paul's final word to the Jews in Rome must have struck a chord. It meant that *his* world, *his* people were now front and center in the plan of God to call the world to himself. For 2,000 years it had been the Jews, but now it was the Gentiles! If you were Paul, you would, of course, have known that this was coming, but it must have still been something of a bitter blow to a man who was still a Jew through and through, as Jesus his Lord and master had been.

The story of Acts has been, as the entire story of the gospel in the world has been, a story with two sides. We have read of the salvation of multitudes as the gospel made its triumphant way from Jerusalem to Rome. And, of course, this is hardly the whole story. It was moving east as well as west, south as well as north. Luke couldn't tell us that story, even if he had had the opportunity, as he must have, to hear tell of the progress of the gospel work in distant places. Did he know that Thomas had reached India? Who knows? The Romans knew where India was, Alexander had reached its western reaches four centuries earlier.

But progress was always accompanied by defeat. Many who heard the message refused to believe it among both Jews and Gentiles. The story of the gospel in the world is the story of its acceptance, the joy of salvation, the transformation of life, and the growth of the church. But it is also the story of rejection, resistance, indifference or hostility. It was so already in Jerusalem at Pentecost. There were many more than 3,000 who witnessed the descent of the Holy Spirit and heard Peter's sermon that long ago Sunday. And as the church grew the hostility of the Jews increased. And so it was in all the cities in which Paul conducted his ministry. Only some Jews; only some Gentiles, though more Gentiles than Jews. Paul would rejoice in the salvation of souls and, sometimes in the same place, shake the dust of his feet off against the defiant majority who wanted nothing to do with Jesus of Nazareth. As he would himself tell the Corinthians (2 Cor. 2:14-15), his ministry was two-fold: to be an aroma of Christ both to those who were being saved and to those who were perishing, To the one we are, he said, the fragrance of life; to the other the smell of death. And so it has been ever since. Where the gospel is preached, where

Christians explain it to others, they either bring life to those who believe or they ring the funeral bell of eternal loss in the ears of those who will not.

But all the while the gospel marches on. Generation after generation of believers have come and gone, passing on the faith to their children and spreading it throughout the world. In our time we are witnessing tremendous growth in the church, so much so that, as we learned from Dr. Tom Johnson not so long ago, the *Evangelical Alliance* is *the fifth largest organization in the world* – representing somewhere between 600 and 800 million evangelical Christians across the globe, a number, by the way, that includes only some of the world’s evangelical Christians. Only the United Nations, the governments of China and India and the Roman Catholic Church represent more human beings and the Catholics themselves admit that of the 1.2 billion members they claim only about 400 million are practicing Catholics, whereas the Alliance’s membership is virtually all practicing.

To reach Rome was the goal because Paul’s presence there was to represent this historic turning point in the history of the church of God. But before he got there Paul was arrested, subjected to a number of legal proceedings, imprisoned for two years in Caesarea, made the object of at least two assassination attempts; then he was nearly drowned in the Mediterranean Sea, was nearly killed by the soldiers who were guarding him, and bitten by a poisonous snake. *And he got to Rome nevertheless*. Such is the history of the gospel and those who bear witness to it. Such is its twists and turns, and such is its indestructible nature. [Stott, 402]

One magnificent demonstration of the truth of the book of Acts is that the story Luke told has continued to be the story of Christian witness to the gospel ever since. The story of Luke’s world is in all significant respects the story of our world. As we live our lives, following Jesus day by day, the gospel itself is doing the same: enjoying triumph, enduring defeat, but all the while the kingdom of God grows! And *this* is the great story and it is our immense privilege, yours and mine, to be a part of it!