The Unstoppable Gospel

Acts 28:11-31
Key Verse: Acts 28:31
“He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ—with all boldness and without hindrance.”

Just a little over a year ago, we began our study of the book of Acts and it started with the Jewish religious leaders thinking they had rid themselves of Jesus by getting the Romans to kill him. But to their surprise, Jesus rose from the dead and predicted that his disciples would tell his story everywhere, beginning in Jerusalem, then Samaria and eventually to the ends of the earth. The story of Jesus’ death and resurrection is called the gospel, which means good news. It is called the good news because only the gospel can save us from the sins that we’ve committed. Who would have thought that Jesus’ disciples, eleven men, from various walks of life, would end up changing the world forever. It would be hard enough for those eleven men to make any lasting change in the world even if they were wealthy and unopposed. But that was not the case, they had limited resources and the Jewish religious leaders were doing everything in their power to shut them up. Those who sincerely followed Jesus were mocked, humiliated, imprisoned and even killed. However, the gospel proved to be unstoppable. In today’s passage, the final installment of the book of acts, Paul finally reaches Rome. He enters bound in chains but he finishes in victory. Let’s see how it happens.

Our story picks up with Paul and the other ship wreck survivors on the tiny island of Malta. Luke writes “After three months we put out to sea in a ship that had wintered in the island—it was an Alexandrian ship with the figurehead of the twin gods Castor and Pollux.” (v11) Who would have guessed that God’s grace would have been poured out so abundantly upon Paul and his companions while they stayed on Malta. It’s amazing that they had even survived the deadly storm and ship wreck. They were treated like royalty while they were there, but now the time came for them to leave. So they boarded an Egyptian ship that had the twin gods, the sons of Zeus, what we would call Gemini. The fact that we still know them today indicates that the world was, and still is, under the influence of idols. Ours is a world that needs the gospel of Jesus. From Malta, they sailed to Syracuse on the island of Sicily. Then they sailed to Rhegium on the Italian peninsula. Two days later they arrived at Puteoli, known as the port of Rome. Look at verse 14. “There we found some brothers and sisters who invited us to spend a week with them. And so we came to Rome.” At last, Paul came to Rome. Paul first mentioned Rome after seeing God’s great work in Ephesus. He said, “…After I have been there, I must visit Rome also.” (Acts 19:21) However even though Paul wanted to go, he was delayed by hardships and jail. Sometimes, it looked so bad that he might die before getting there, but Jesus appeared to him and promised, “Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome.” (Acts 23:11) Even when they were in the middle of that terrible storm, the Lord’s angel said to him, “Do not be afraid Paul. You must stand trial before Caesar...” (Ac 27:24). In spite of all these difficulties, God was with them, guiding them every step of the way. It was a long and eventful journey, but at last, Paul was

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standing on Roman soil.

Look at verse 15. “The brothers and sisters there had heard that we were coming, and they traveled as far as the Forum of Appius and the Three Taverns to meet us. At the sight of these people Paul thanked God and was encouraged.” I’m not sure how they heard that Paul was coming, since it had been winter and normally ships didn’t sail at that time of the year, still they had heard the news. The Christians there probably didn’t know Paul personally and yet they traveled a long distance, about 150 miles, just to meet him. Paul had wrote to them previously saying, “ I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong— **12** that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith. ” (Ro 1) And it was true. Paul was encouraged by just seeing them and they were encouraged by his visit. I thank God for his people that have the gift of encouragement. They really know how to lift our spirits.

Paul had been on a long journey, maybe about a year, when he finally gets to Rome. It’s around A.D. 60, and as soon as he get there doesn’t waste time but gets right down to business. You would think that after all that he’s been through he would relax a little. No Paul, three days after his arrival, he called together the leaders of the Jews and talked with them (17-20). Paul’s ministry wasn’t random; he had a principle, “First for the Jew, then for the Gentile.” So when Paul gathered a large number of Roman Jews he wanted to explain why he was there. Firstly, Paul wanted them to know that he was not a criminal. That he was innocent and had been put in prison because of the Jew’s political pressure in Jerusalem. He wanted them to know that even though he was falsely accused, he wasn’t there calling upon Caesar to retaliate against his people. Paul understood his life from God’s point of view. It was because of the hope of Israel that he was in chains. Here the hope of Israel refers to the hope that the Jews had in the Messiah, whom God promised would come and save his people and establish the kingdom of God.

As Paul begins to talk with the Roman Jews he finds out that they already don’t have a good view of Christians. Even though there is a negative view of Christianity, they want to know what Paul’s views are, and so they came in large numbers to meet him (21-22). Paul, “… witnessed to them from morning till evening, explaining about the kingdom of God, and from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets he tried to persuade them about Jesus.” (v23b) Paul started with something they were familiar with, namely their law, and he showed how their law revealed God’s promise to send the Messiah to save them. In their law, there were more than 300 clues that revealed who the Messiah was and Paul showed how all of them connected to Jesus. And the climax of Paul’s message was about how Jesus overcame death and one day he would user in a new era of God’s kingdom. The kingdom of God is where God himself will be with his people. And all people will worship God as their King. It is a place where God will make everything new and he promised that in his kingdom there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain. There will be true joy, real love and lasting peace. There will be no shame or deceit for nothing impure will enter it. And it will shine with the glory of God (Rev 21) as all God’s people are gathered there to live forever. This is why Paul always spoke about God’s kingdom, because it was his hope to one day go there. This is why he always preached the gospel, because the gospel is calling people to God’s kingdom.

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(Jesus also often spoke of God's kingdom) Paul hoped that the Jews in Rome would accept Jesus as their Messiah. Some of them believed, but the others would not believe because Jesus was not the kind of savior they wanted. Jesus came to save men from their sins through his death and resurrection, but the Jews wanted a political savior. Their hope was that their nation would be restored to its former glory as a world power. Their memory of their nation was this rosy picture, but reality was far different.

A few of them believed, but most of them didn't. How did Paul handle their rejection? It was nothing new to him. There are no surprises in God, only fulfillment of his prophecy. In the time of rejection we also must be like Paul and have eyes to see what God is doing based on his word. Paul saw where God's work and history were going. God's salvation was being sent to the Gentiles just as Simeon prophesied years before when he saw the baby Jesus. (Lk 2:32) And so Paul was inspired by the Holy Spirit and quoted from the prophet Isaiah "You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving." **27** 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.'" (v26-27) They were so stubborn, they refused to believe. Paul concluded, "Therefore I want you to know that God's salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen!" (v28) After this the Jews began to leave. This sounds like a solemn or sad comment as if the story is going to end. But it doesn't "For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. **31** He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ—with all boldness and without hindrance!" (v30-31) It is not by accident that Luke ended his book on this note. The Jewish rejection of the gospel and the acceptance of the Gentiles has been a major theme throughout Acts. Indeed, the book opens with the question of Israel's place in God's kingdom (1:6). It closes on the same note. The conclusion to Acts is carefully constructed. It is not a message of exclusion, at first the Gentiles are exclude and once the Jews reject it, they are excluded. No it's more a message of inclusion, where the door of salvation has been opened to all people, Jew and Gentile because of what Jesus did.

Factually speaking, Paul was a prisoner. He was confined to house arrest and couldn't move around freely and yet the gospel continues to spread, how? It's because the work Paul was doing, was not his own. Paul was doing God's work. God was with him, helping him to carry the message of the gospel to the ends of the earth. During these two years in Rome, Paul wrote Philippians, Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon. The reason the gospel is unstoppable is because God is behind it. Here is a small sample of the amazing things that have happened in Acts. God enabled the first disciples to speak foreign languages at the exact time Jerusalem is filled with foreigners. Paul, who was against Jesus and attacking the Christians meets Jesus personally and believes and is completely changed and now becomes the early church's biggest supporter. God enabled Peter and Paul to heal many sick people, even raising some from the dead.

If we look at the obstacles, the hindrances that were opposing the gospel, there were many. The disciples were put in prison, and they miraculously set free. Even when Paul was shipwrecked on

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Malta, how could they go anywhere? They didn't have money, supplies or a ship. They barely had the clothes on their back and yet that didn't stop them. Paul himself had been in prison several times, been flogged and exposed to death again and again. Five times he was whipped with 40 lashes. Three times he was beaten with rods, once he was stoned and left for dead. Three times he was shipwrecked. He spent a night and a day in the open sea. He was constantly on the move and in danger in the city, in the country, at sea and from false believers. He had often gone without sleep and food. He had been cold and naked. (2 Cor 11) And even after all that, still it didn't stop the gospel. Paul had been in prison for 5 years and at the end of Acts he is released and it appears that he has some freedom to proclaim the gospel. The book of acts covers roughly 30 years and ends on a victorious note. It may give the impression that everything turns out good and they all live happily ever after. However that is not the case.

Does anyone know what happened to the original 11 disciples? According to church history, Andrew went to modern day Georgia and was crucified, suspended on an olive tree. Bartholomew went to India and was crucified upside down. James son of Alphaeus, stayed in Jerusalem and was stoned to death. James son of Zebedee was killed by the sword in Jerusalem. John, James' brother was boiled oil (deep fried) but miraculously nothing happened to him, so out of fear they banished him to the island of Patmos. He was the only disciple to die of old age. Mathew went to modern day Tehran where he was killed. Philip was killed in eastern Turkey. Simon the zealot was killed in Jerusalem. Thaddaeus (also called Jude) went to Mesopotamia where he was killed. Thomas we to India where he was killed with a pine spear. And lastly tradition says that both Peter and Paul were killed in Rome. Peter, because he wasn't a Roman citizen, was crucified upside down in front of a crowd at the circus and Paul was beheaded in a more honorable private setting.

-- Please listen to the audio for the full conclusion – These are only topics -

We see parallels between chapter 1 and the last chapter. They open talking about the kingdom of God and seeing the power of the Holy Spirit. I believe that this reveals the importance of them. What does this mean to us? We should learn a lesson from the Jews. Paul pleaded with them to believe but they wouldn't However God's plan is moving forward. It's not stopping. God's kingdom is going to come. Since then, in every generation, the established institutions have failed and vanished. In our time, so many so-called mainline denominations of Christianity compromise with the culture. We must know that God's church is not confined in these corrupted old institutions. God's church is in moving forward.

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