

Well, I know you will like me be extremely upset that this is the final teaching on the book of Acts. Haven't we moved so quickly through this series? The truth is that we started back in September 2019 and I'm sure for some of you you're saying, 'no not any more please'. Nearly 40 sermons have been preached on this book, and I suppose the big issue was that COVID interrupted it slightly. A huge thank you to the folks who have faithfully helped with teaching, and I'm sure they are looking forward to the next series on Isaiah – all 66 chapters of it. Only joking. Now we are on the final chapter and hopefully this morning you have noticed that it doesn't end with some big climax like the movies do. The truth is that the Book of Acts never really ends.

Back at the beginning of the series, we saw the emergence of the new Church, equipped by the power of the Holy Spirit to these new believers. These foundations have stood the test of time, because the story of the Church of God continues. The Holy Spirit continues to bring power for the present age. In many ways, as we come to Acts 28 and we come to the end of the book, we really find ourselves at the beginning; that God, the same God who, through His Spirit, writes this book, is not done telling His story. In fact the Scriptures as a whole, is a dynamic book—it doesn't sit still.

Let me attempt to give us all a brief summary of where we have been throughout this series. Luke writes his Gospel message of the life of Jesus Christ, and then he continues with great depth and detail as he writes another book to Theophilus about how Jesus sends the Holy Spirit into the life of the believers. That Spirit drives them, shapes them, forms them, births the church and launches the church on mission. These 28 chapters cover about 30 years in total. We have things that take place on three different continents. We have the church that's birthed in Jerusalem. We have the gospel that continues to go forth as Paul takes it to the ends of the earth.

We have 14 churches planted by the Apostle Paul alone, but we know that many other churches find their roots in this time period. He travels over 10,000 miles on missionary journeys by land and by sea. We see in Acts 2 and Acts 4 the blueprint for the church – it's a place of community, it's filled with generosity, and it survives at times under extremely difficult challenges. It challenges the core of Government declaring that Caesar is not Lord, Jesus is Lord! It challenges the ancient religious dogma that's bound by rules, and breaks the legalism of the church with freedom. From those early days with a fearful bunch of followers in Jerusalem, we now travel almost 3,000 miles as Paul finally arrives in Rome.

I'm sure many of you can think of different films that you have watched, and it ends with that black screen but leaves so much unanswered and unresolved. Well we have examples like that within the Bible. For example you will all remember the story of the Prodigal Son. Jesus tells a parable about a son who comes to his father and asks for his inheritance. The father gives him the inheritance and he blows it all, comes back home and is welcomed by the father. A party ensues...they kill the fatted calf. There's dancing and music. The story ends with the older son standing in the field saying I won't go in. The focus turns again to the other son, and we hear nothing more about the older son. The story appears to be completely unresolved.

And it's the same with the Book of Acts. We have lots more questions like what happened to the Church in Rome, or what happened to Paul, but it's not there. You see I think the reason why we get annoyed with films that don't end properly, or books that leave us hanging, is that we live in a culture and a time that likes the answers. But we can't read scripture like this. We have got to enter into the story that affects us now and is relevant for now rather than read it as some historical text. That's why the Book of Acts remains open – the story is about you.

And today at the end of our series, I think we need to embrace this idea. This is an invitation from God that we have this unique opportunity to step back into the story. I can remember my last boss telling me that he had read the bible cover to cover just like a novel, and he just didn't get it. That's because he had removed himself from the story. And so what if our goal as followers of Jesus was to tell our story to a culture that doesn't know God. What we see in the book of Acts and what we see all throughout the Scriptures, is not just an invitation to believe something but to be a part of something.

And so don't think of this book ending very abruptly. No it ends beautifully for us. It ends by saying there's much more to come. Let's listen to how the book started, *'In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God'*. Now, what does Paul end the book of Acts telling them about? The kingdom of God. He ends it under house arrest, preaching the same message about the Kingdom of God, verse 31, and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ.

You see there's no possible way that you can end the story of Jesus Christ because it must go on. This gospel goes forward without hindrance. Nothing can stop it. And Jesus is still writing His story in lives of all those who come to him! The end of the book of Acts does not mean that He is done. In fact, the way the book ends invites us to believe that WE are a part of what He continues to do.

So for me the question this morning at the end of all of this is, are you willing to join in? It's not going to happen if all you do is enjoy the weekly teaching in a building such as this, or go to your house groups and receive teaching there. That's like going to McDonald's every day and never making food for yourself. We must be coworkers in the Gospel. N. T. Wright puts it like this: "The authority of the Bible is the authority of a love story in which we are invited to take part."

I've been very conscious over this last year and maybe before that, that everyone invests their time into something. Your story, my story, your life, my life, will be give energy to something....all of us give our lives to something. We attach our energy, our time, our resources and our money to things that either cause our lives to end with us or cause our story to continue the ripple effects into eternity. In this last year I have buried many more people than I would ever want to, but the shock for me has been the stories that some of them have left – centred more around what they did, their interests, their attachments, and very little to knowing their eternal inheritance through Christ. Our lives will be attached to something. The question is will it be

trivial or will it be eternal? Will it be a story that continues to go on? Or will our story end with us?

So what can our story look like?

Last week, John talked about the rough passage on the sea that Paul experienced, and in Acts 28:3 Paul is still on the island of Malta. They had a bit of a treacherous ride there. There was a shipwreck. They swam to the land and now as they sit around a fire a snake comes over and bites Paul. That's really not a great way to end the trauma he's already been through. Can you imagine if that was how the book ended, but it doesn't. And yet with all that he has to struggle through, he finally makes it to Rome. It's the centre of the civilised world. You can't get any better than that, and now Paul has the chance to preach the Word to many people. And so in verse 15 even with all the trauma that he has experienced, he thanks God. If he's shipwrecked, if he's beaten up in jail, whatever happens nothing's going to stop him from preaching Jesus. This is who this guy was. He was convinced that God was continuing to tell his Story through his life. He believed in this mission and he had a vision for a better future. Folks, I believe that if we are committed to attaching our lives to the life of Jesus then there's going to be times where it's going to be tough, and like Paul you are going to have to flick off the snake into the fire and continue to walk forward. If our theology thinks its going to be a walk in the park then we just don't know our scripture.

The story here shows that sometimes the plan doesn't quite work out the way it's expected, but God remains faithful. And so as we think about that story that never ends, I think God is looking for people today who trust him no matter what. If you think about Paul being left alone for 2 whole years, you might wonder what is God actually at, and yet the huge opportunities that came Paul's way could not have been any better. Maybe today you need to step back in and see the story that God has planned in your life, but you've got to be patient. It didn't happen overnight for Paul. It will not happen overnight for you, but whatever happens don't give up on God because he certainly hasn't given up on you. Keep longing that Jesus would use your life as you reach out to people with the hope of the Gospel of Jesus. Seek him every day, being open to what he will want to do through you in the ordinary things of life – maybe it's the conversation with someone you know that begins a journey of faith, maybe your involvement in something in our Church that opens up giftings that you never realised you had. Keep longing for Jesus to use your life.

In verse 23 while he's under house arrest the Jewish Leaders arrange a day to come and see Paul, and it says that he 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. So here's Paul taking the religious books that these leaders are most familiar with, and he uses them to preach about Jesus. He's taking a huge risk, because all he has to do is say something that is contrary to the teaching of Moses and he's a gonner. He's already under house arrest so all they need to do is give the word and he's dead. But he doesn't back down, he keeps on preaching about Jesus. And what that says to me about our ongoing story is that we need to be risk takers. We need to be willing in this age and in these days of liberal wishy washy theology to stand on our convictions, even when life gets real difficult. And the truth about the Apostle Paul is that he was so

convinced about the message that he brought. He would never forget the incredible journey he was on as a persecutor of the Way and now having encountered the living resurrected Jesus was the carrier of the message to both Jews and Gentiles. He was overflowing with love for the people who he delivered the message to. And if we're going to live lives of boldness, which I think our culture needs us to do, it's not going to be when we sign up for the latest little project and say "Yes I'll volunteer to be bold today". No it takes people who are convinced of the message like Paul was, who live a life dedicated to God, and who absolutely love, not as another wee church project but as people who love those that we have the opportunity to speak God's Word into.

Here's the last thing that we see in Paul's life coming from verse 25. He's addressing the Jewish leaders and telling them, I know you're standing in Rome right now as Jewish leaders, but the Scriptures talk about you and they talk about your ancestors. He tells them there's a consistent pattern where the Word is preached to their people, some believe, many don't, and so the message becomes focused on the Gentiles who listen and respond to the Word of God. But here's the amazing thing about what Paul is doing here. He's taking the Scriptures and he's applying it to the people he's interacting with. He says to them, "this is where you stand right now. God was talking about you!" And I think that's what we need to do as followers of God as we speak into the culture and the people that are around us in our lives. We've got to be people who are convinced that this isn't the end of the story, but that it's the beginning; that we're invited not just to read about God, but to walk with God in his mission, and to hear what he is saying to today's culture through the Scriptures – it's what I would consider as the prophetic – speaking prophetically over our nations and towns and people.

I think God's looking for people who hear His voice and declare that God is still speaking today, that he is still at work. And, in some mysterious way, he's using your life and my life as a part of that.

You know as we come out of a year of lockdown, as life looks like it will now return to some kind of normal, then I desire that we as a Church are people who tell God's story for this time, and that God is still at work. As we open our churches to many within the community and reach out with love, we are not doing this to prove that we are successful. No as we engage with our community, through teaching, through evangelism, through young people's ministries, through compassion to those in need we are saying that the God we serve is still at work; that the chapters of the book are not finished with; We are declaring that the story is still being written as we see our own lives grow, new lives coming to know Jesus, and broken lives being restored. The story goes on folks. It's why the book of Acts doesn't end with a nice clean bow, with curtains that close and credits that roll. We do NOT read the Scriptures in a way that says happily ever after. We READ the Scriptures in a way where God says welcome to a new beginning that involves you!

And so the book of Acts ends with Paul in house arrest but proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about Jesus with all boldness and without hindrance! I think Luke adds that in for us just so we don't think that the Gospel is in chains—Paul is in chains, yes. But he says no, this story is going forward with boldness and without hindrance. That's really the invitation I leave with you today in your spiritual walk –

18<sup>th</sup> April 2021 – Acts 28:14b – 31 His story never ends

go from here irrespective of the things that try to pull you down, and go with the strength of God proclaiming the Good News everywhere you go with boldness and without hindrance knowing there is much more that God has for you to do.