

Words and Deeds: Journey's End Part 1
By Jason Huff
September 8, 2019
Psalm 22:23-28; Matthew 10:16-22; Acts 28:16-31

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Acts 28:16-31, closing out our study of the book. May God bless the reading of His perfect, holy, and sacred Word. "When we got to Rome, Paul was allowed to live by himself, with a soldier to guard him. Three days later he called together the leaders of the Jews. When they had assembled, Paul said to them: "My brothers, although I have done nothing against our people or against the customs of our ancestors, I was arrested in Jerusalem and handed over to the Romans. They examined me and wanted to release me, because I was not guilty of any crime deserving death. But when the Jews objected, I was compelled to appeal to Caesar -- not that I had any charge to bring against my own people. For this reason I have asked to see you and talk with you. It is because of the hope of Israel that I am bound with this chain." They replied, "We have not received any letters from Judea concerning you, and none of the brothers who have come from there has reported or said anything bad about you. But we want to hear what your views are, for we know that people everywhere are talking against this sect." They arranged to meet Paul on a certain day, and came in even larger numbers to the place where he was staying. From morning till evening he explained and declared to them the kingdom of God and tried to convince them about Jesus from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets. Some were convinced by what he said, but others would not believe. They disagreed among themselves and began to leave after Paul had made this final statement: "The Holy Spirit spoke the truth to your forefathers when he said through Isaiah the prophet: "Go to this people and say, "You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving." 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." "Therefore I want you to know that God's salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen!" For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ."

For years, I wasn't certain if Barrymore's was east or west of Heydenreich. Wasn't precisely sure on Hall Road where the Aspen was a couple of weeks ago at Ed's birthday party. Sometimes people will mention a hole-in-the-wall restaurant I've passed virtually every day for the past 11 years, and I'm like, "Where is that?" And what I've realized is, I've driven most everywhere I've needed to go in Metro Detroit. I'm not staring out the window; I'm focused on the road and the cars in front and in back of me. The destination has been my goal.

But journeys are important too. If you go to western Michigan in the fall and don't see miss the changing colors, you've miss one of the reasons to go in the first place. Head right where you're going and you miss out on stops along the way. There's a restaurant in Defiance, Ohio called El Mezcal that I love. Now I've never had a reason to be in Defiance, Ohio. But on long trips back and forth from Indiana over the last decade, I found it was the perfect stopping point...and why not have great fajitas on the trip? We've bumped into long-lost church buddies at a Chik-Fil-A in Georgia and school friends at a gas station in Tennessee. Part of the journey.

We've finally reached the journey's end for the book of Acts; this will make our 62nd and final look at Luke's epic story of the early church. The ending is a little surprising, not what we might expect, and so we'll actually get the finale of Paul's story next week from one of his letters. But the ending shows that God has been on the move; He has been the reason for Paul's journeys; He has coordinated everything for all of the apostles to reach the people they have with the good news of Jesus. And hopefully we'll get some insight into our journey with Him as well.

So at long last, Paul is in Rome. This is the reason he appealed to Caesar; he is fulfilling the purposes God informed him about a long time ago. He's still a prisoner, still chained to a Roman guard. Yet there's little attempt to keep a reign on him; he has made friends with the centurions and soldiers, and they trust him with their lives. He's essentially under house arrest, but he is far better off than he once was.

When he arrives, the first thing he does after getting settled is bring together the Jewish leaders in Rome. Even though he doesn't have his freedom, he wants to do what he has always done whenever he's entered a new city – he goes to the synagogue, to where the Jewish people are, to bring news of the Messiah to them. He can't go, so he has them come to him. And before he starts, he puts all the facts out there. He makes sure they know that he has nothing against his own people, and he's done nothing against the law or the customs of Israel or anything else. The reason he's in chains, the reason he's lost his freedom, is because of his faith in Jesus – the hope of Israel. And he wants them to share his belief.

Surprisingly, all the leaders are like, "We've not heard about you at all!" Now when we take into consideration everything, it's not really shocking. When Paul's ship got blown 500 miles off-course, it did actually get them a lot closer to Rome than they would have ever been by that time of year. If the Jews opposing Paul had sent delegates following him, they might well be a month or more behind him.

There's also something else – there were serious punishments for those who brought frivolous cases before Caesar. Since everyone knew there was no evidence and no Jewish laws broken, maybe they took the hint. Last but not least, Paul was no longer anywhere near Jerusalem. He was halfway across the world as far as they were concerned. The Jewish leadership was typically practical – if Paul was out of sight, was there any reason to stir up trouble with Rome over a rabble-rouser? Probably not.

With that in mind, they were interested in hearing what Paul had to say. They weren't completely unfamiliar with Christianity; after all, by this point we're looking at just around 30 years since Jesus' death and resurrection. Christians lived in Rome, and rumors about them had obviously been the talk of Rome by then. But as far as we know, this was the first time one of the apostles or evangelists had made it to Rome to share the gospel directly with the Jewish people who lived there. When Paul speaks to them, he is truly taking the truth of God to the ends of the earth as they were considered then...at least from one end of the empire to the other.

The reaction is about what you'd expect because it's an echo of what has happened everywhere Paul has gone. They do give him a fair shot at presenting the gospel. He preaches all day, from morning to evening. Some of those there are genuinely interested, genuinely convinced. And others just aren't persuaded, even though Paul makes a compelling argument.

But the closing statement gets them to thinking and arguing amongst themselves – Scripture had predicted the inability of God's people to see and accept God's Word when it came to them. And when Paul says that now it is time for the Gentiles to hear, that really stirs things up. The racism that was extremely common in that era shows its nasty side. And we have no real way to say who believed and who didn't, who kept coming back and who decided Paul really was the danger the leaders in Jerusalem thought.

But here's a thought that I believe resonates today: *don't give up on God's ability to reach those He has chosen for His Kingdom*. Paul had done this countless times before, almost always with the same result – rejection and expulsion from the synagogue. A few people believed, but the vast majority stayed put, content in believing that they alone were chosen and that by following their understanding of the Scripture, they were safe. Yet Paul taught us in his letter to the Roman church that the message was always first for the Jews. God chose them; He worked through them and made Himself known through them. The message of the Messiah could only be understood through the lens of the people of Israel. So he kept praying, kept working, knowing that some would hear and believe.

No one is going to accuse CrossWay of being a big church. You might have given up on growing bigger, or maybe you've thought, "Well, I do kinda like things the way they are now." Or you might have a friend or relative that you've tried to share faith with and they just aren't interested, maybe several, and you think, "Is it even worth trying it with others?" And the answer is yes. Because it's not about you and whether or not you're doing a good job sharing your faith. It really is about God and what He is accomplishing.

In his second letter to the church in Corinth, Paul told them that we are the fragrance of Christ in the world. To some people, it smells like death – to those who will not repent and come to God, it is foul. But to those who are being saved, it is the fragrance of life, the sweetest smell they could ever experience.

Our job is not to change the fragrance into something it's not so that it will be more appealing. It's kind of like when you go into a middle school locker room and the guys don't want to shower so they just spray on a lot of Axe body spray. It just doesn't work. Instead, we are to present the real truth of Christ and let God do His work through us. So the question for us is not, "Are we successful?" in the typical sense. The question is, are we really trying? Are we letting people know that Jesus has rescued us and is promising them a new life as they repent and believe? We'll come back to that thought in a minute.

So Luke closes Acts with a short summary: "For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ." After the shipwreck and the viper and all that, this seems a bit...well, anticlimactic. But it's not. It's coming full circle.

Remember way back, over a year ago, to Acts 1. The disciples have their final conversations with Jesus before He is taken up into heaven. And they ask, “Is now when the Kingdom of God will be restored to Israel?” And Jesus said, “It’s not for you to know that, but you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” The promise of Acts 1 is fulfilled here. The gospel is proclaimed boldly and without hindrance in Rome, which while not the literal ends of the earth was essentially the ends of the Empire. And as we look at church history, we see the apostles going further to bring Christ to the nations.

Paul’s story isn’t done, and we might think, why did Luke stop here? Maybe it was because this was where Paul was when Luke was done writing. He couldn’t write any more because there wasn’t more to write yet! Some scholars don’t like that idea because it means that the books of Luke and Acts would have been written by the early 60s. But there’s no reason to think that’s not the case.

But had Luke written up to the end of Paul’s earthly story, it might have defeated the purpose. Acts was not written to be “The Adventures of Paul.” He doesn’t even show up until chapter 8, and his missionary journeys don’t begin until chapter 13! Acts was written to tell us how the early church grew and fulfilled Jesus’ mission. It’s no one person’s story; it’s the story of Jesus working through the church to make His salvation known to everyone.

And that leads us to our second point: *our individual journeys find their importance as they show how God has moved in us.* Paul is front and center for roughly half of the book of Acts, but he’s far from the only important person. Peter, John, Philip, Stephen, Barnabas, Timothy, Simon...they all play a part. There are many more smaller stories we learn, too, as different believers share in the role of spreading the gospel. Each person who gives their life to Christ and follows Him gains importance, but their importance is in how God loved them and used them to further the Kingdom.

What makes your life important? Maybe you’ve never thought of it, or worse, maybe you don’t think you are important. Maybe you think you’re important because of the work you do. Maybe you find importance in being a parent or grandparent. Maybe your importance comes from being a good spouse or volunteering or the money you can give to charity. But a lot of those things where we find meaning are temporary and fleeting.

But what Scripture shows us is that our importance is wrapped up in our relationship with God. From the very beginning of Scripture, we are shown to be made in the image of God. Our relationship with God was broken by our sinfulness, and yet we still keep that image. As God restores our relationship with Him, Scripture says that we reflect His glory. Our importance is in our reflecting God’s light to the world around us.

You don’t have to be a world-changer. You don’t have to be really good at something. You don’t have to be impressive by human standards. We don’t need earthly importance. What we really just have to be is available, willing for God to work through us. I have had to fight my whole life with what I was taught as a child, that because I was reasonably smart, I needed to do something important and meaningful. I have struggled with that weight. All I really needed to learn was that being a faithful believer, someone who walks with Jesus, is what matters.

The Bible is full of the stories of thousands of people who were around for a very short period of time. But God is the center of those stories; all of those stories find meaning and weight in Him and through Him. If you struggle with meaning and purpose, turn to Christ, and you will find that your purpose is wrapped up in Him.

Finally, just kind of a last thought today, not up front in the passage but one that I'm reminded of as Paul spends two years sitting around Rome teaching anyone willing to stop by his house: *God sends people, not postcards*. When God reaches out to us, He sends us messengers. He sends Moses so both the Israelites and the Egyptians know His name and His power. He sends the prophets, even when like Jonah they'd rather go anywhere else. He sends His very own Son. While God gave us a book, it didn't drop out of heaven. It came to us through the people He sent to us to warn us, guide us, and direct us to Him. Even believers who come to trust in Jesus through reading the Scripture are handed one by someone who cared enough to give them a copy. God brings people to Himself through other people.

It doesn't mean postcards are bad. We've sent them before, and we send them to those who've moved into the neighborhoods nearest the church. It's good for people to know we are here and we care about them. But ultimately postcards don't bring people to Christ or even to church, as we've seen. Neither do TV commercials or billboards or newspaper advertisements. People bring other people to church, and through that witness, they sometimes become believers.

Here's the thing: the personalities we have at CrossWay are great. We care about each other. We support one another. We are a faith community with a lot of things going for it. But we don't have a Paul. We don't have a deep drive to see more people come to faith; we want them to do so, absolutely, but we don't tend to be driven people. Some of us are working at it, trying to make connections. It's hard work, particularly if we're not gifted at it. I want to encourage you, though – keep at it. God is working through you *as you are*.

Barnabas was a supporter. We didn't hear many of his words in Acts, he wasn't driven like Paul was, but he was effective enough that the church sent him out with John Mark to encourage the churches that he and Paul had planted and to grow them. John tends to be the quiet one in the shadow of Peter. And yet eventually, John writes the most brilliant gospel of them all, the one that shows us that Jesus is God in the flesh, that helps us understand who Jesus fully is. John had a whole community of followers learning from him by the end of his life. We need every kind of person in the personalities and character God has given them sharing the gospel so that others will come to believe. And God used flawed people, not perfect ones. God shines through our flaws because they make us more dependent on Him.

As we wrap up Acts, hopefully we've seen that God was on the move in the early church. And that mission hasn't changed. We as God's people are still spreading His Kingdom everywhere we go. Peter and Paul and Barnabas, their mission is now our mission. As we journey with Jesus, yes, we do want to get to our eventual goal – life with Him in eternity. But we're on the journey now, and God has so much to do in and through us here and now. Will you give your life to Him each day so that it might reflect His glory? Will you give your life to Him each day so that you might experience His grace and love for you?