

## The Good News Unhindered

-How appropriate it is, Friends, that today, on this Pentecost Sunday, after 21 weeks together in the Acts of the Apostles, we come to the end of Luke's two-volume story.

It's worth asking what kind of story we've been reading all these months. Because at first glance, Acts can look like the story of the early church's success. The acts of the apostles. Sermons are preached. A movement grows. New communities form to share everything in common. Former outsiders and enemies are welcomed. Churches are planted. The gospel spreads across the Mediterranean world.

But that's not fully how Luke tells the story. Again and again, the movement of the good news of Jesus seems fragile, frustrated, endangered, even doomed. The apostles are threatened. Stephen is murdered. Saul terrorizes believers. The church argues over who really belongs. Doors close. Paul and Silas sit in prison. Riots erupt in Thessalonica. The marketplace mostly dismisses Paul's preaching. Along the way, there are wounds, failures, delays, persecutions, arguments, estrangements, and chains.

And yet the story keeps moving. The gospel catches fire in hearts and communities.

Why? Because Acts is not ultimately the story of competent religious people building a successful institution. It's a mistitled book. Not really about 'the acts of the apostles.' Instead it's the story of the Spirit poured out at Pentecost. It's the story of the Spirit of Christ continuing the life of Jesus through persons learning to trust his grace alive more than power, fear, or control.

So we've called our series 'Acts of the Spirit: Becoming like Jesus.' And when we step back, that's what we've seen. New communities of persons becoming like Christ in prayerful dependence. In courageous witness. In radical generosity. Communities becoming like Christ in crossing boundaries toward unexpected people. In refusing to keep gates. In suffering without bitterness. In engaging culture with sympathy and conviction. In loving others more than status or self-protection.

We've seen persons coming alive together in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. And we've seen that becoming like Jesus does not lead his people around suffering, but through it, to a wise, mature, joyful hope in spite of obstacles and pain.

-Today we come to the last eight chapters. Acts 21–28 comes after Paul's three missionary journeys from the Ancient Near East to cities in present day Turkey and Greece. The theme of this final section is the unstoppable movement of the gospel through suffering, opposition, and empire. It tells the story of not just Paul's calling, but our own: to persevere in trust to the end. What it affirms is that

Not mobs. Not courts. Not chains. Not storms. Not Caesar.

Nothing will stop the good news of Jesus!

-Let's pray: Lord, on this day of Pentecost, we ask that you would pour out your Spirit on us, that with Paul we might be part of the good news: enduring in faith through every obstacle, trusting the risen Lord, and bearing witness to his hope. Amen.

-OK. So. As Ron shared with us last week, as Paul returns from his third missionary journey, he keeps running into groups of believers that warn him by the Spirit that in Jerusalem he will meet with something ominous.

20:22 And now, as a captive to the Spirit [of Jesus],<sup>23</sup> he tells the Ephesian elders, 'I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and persecutions are waiting for me. 24 But I do not count my life of any value to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the good news of God's grace.

Paul has come to entrust his life to the Lord, and to the purpose of bearing witness to what matters most: a fresh start that leads to life in the never-failing love of God.

So Paul sets his face toward Jerusalem. He knows danger awaits him, but he goes anyway. His journey increasingly becomes like the Lord's: a determined, faithful, joyful pilgrimage of tears through suffering.

As I tell the story, you may wish to consider what mobs, courts, chains, storms, or Ceasars we ourselves are facing as those struggling to believe and point to good news.

Here's what happens...

Once Paul reaches Jerusalem, a rumor spreads that he's turned against the Jewish people and the law. The city erupts. A crowd seizes him in the Temple courts, drags him outside, and beats him. Chaos swallows the streets. And it looks like this Jesus movement will end there – in violence and misunderstanding. But even from the Temple steps, bruised and chained, Paul wants only to proclaim Jesus. He shares his own story of hope with those who want to hurt him. This obstacle becomes an opportunity. This mob becomes a mission field. The Spirit of Christ is within Paul. Even mobs will not stop the gospel.

After being arrested and speaking to the hostile crowd, Paul is put in Roman protective custody. And that night, the Lord Jesus Christ appears to him, saying: 'Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome.' Over the next chapters (both of his life and of the Book of Acts), Paul is shuffled from hearing to hearing. He's a political problem no one knows how to solve. Before governors, lawyers, councils, and kings, the accusations pile up. Yet for Paul every courtroom becomes a pulpit. Before the Roman Governor Felix (in Acts 24), before Felix's successor, Festus, (in Acts 25), before Rome's Jewish puppet King Herod Agrippa II (in Acts 25–26), Paul keeps sharing the hope of the resurrection of Jesus. Of a king whose love and authority will live forever. He addresses these rulers not like powerful authorities, but like vulnerable persons who themselves are desperate to discover their true identity and freedom in God's grace. Sound familiar? The empire thinks it's interrogating Paul. But Luke quietly shows the opposite: the gospel is interrogating the empire. The Spirit of Christ is within Paul. Even courts will not stop the gospel.

So Paul has to spend years guarded and forgotten. Remember the story of Joseph sold into slavery, seemingly forgotten in Pharaoh's dungeon? How the Scripture keeps whispering in these seemingly God forsaken circumstances, that 'God was with Joseph'?/ Officials leave Paul imprisoned because releasing him would be politically inconvenient. But Paul never seems imprisoned of soul. Visitors come and go. Life-

changing conversations happen. And hope that God could be so close, caring, humble, just and lifechanging spreads. Even locked away, Paul remains strangely free. The gospel does not depend on open doors. Even as God was with Joseph, the Spirit of Christ is with Paul. Even chains will not stop the gospel.

At one point, when it seems that the governor will make a play to turn him over to the Jewish leaders who want him dead, Paul makes use of his Roman citizenship to appeal to the emperor. He holds on to his Holy-Spiritual sense that his calling to end well means embodying Jesus to the very heart of the empire. How he finishes this race will be determined overseas. A centurion lead him and other prisoners onto a ship. But during the voyage to Rome, the sea turns violent. The sailors panic. Cargo has to be thrown overboard. For days the crew cannot see sun or stars. Everyone assumes death is coming. Yet in the middle of terror, it's Paul the prisoner who stands calm among them. Sound familiar? Loving his jailors as he has before, Paul encourages them not to lose heart. And when the ship splinters apart on the rocks, every single person survives. Even the wind and waves cannot silence the mission of God. The Spirit of Christ is with Paul. Even shipwrecking storms will not stop the gospel.

At last Paul's captors arrive with him in Rome. And Rome is really the shadow hanging over this whole story – the symbol of ultimate power. Armies, governors, prisons, laws, the emperor. Surely this is where the Jesus movement will meet its limit. But Acts ends not with some decree by Caesar, but with Paul under house arrest proclaiming 'the kingdom of God' openly and without hindrance. The final image is almost defiant: the gospel has reached the heart of the empire, and it is still moving outward. The Spirit of Christ is alive within Paul. And even Caesar will not stop the gospel. The emperor is only a fleeting mist. Does anyone even know which Caesar in a procession of worldly brutes this was? The emperor gets no last word. Jesus does.

The good news is still moving. The humble, gracious Lord is alive! Not mobs. Not courts. Not chains. Not storms. Not even Caesar.

Nothing will stop the gospel because the gospel was never dependent on favorable circumstances. It spreads in Acts through persons so grounded in the gracious love of the crucified and risen Christ that even obstacles and suffering become places of peace, opportunities for witness.

And so the Book of Acts ends strangely. There's no final victory scene. No resolution to Paul's trial. No neat conclusion. Just Paul under house arrest in Rome, welcoming all, teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ, and proclaiming the kingdom of God (quote) 'with all boldness and without hindrance.'

That's Luke's final word over the whole gospel story: 'unhindered.'

Fear hinders. Violence hinders. Empires hinder. Exhaustion and discouragement hinder. But good news: the grace of God Alive in Jesus keeps moving outward anyway – through prayerful people; wounded people; generous people; courageous, humble, healing people becoming like Jesus by the Spirit.

-Friends, what are the obstacles to the gospel for us and for our time? What mobs, courts, chains, storms, or Ceasar? What could threaten to undo our hope?

[...Dispiriting loneliness. Hyper-individualism. Tyranny of busyness. Institutional distrust. Selective empathy. Angering algorithms. Digital overload. Absence of common facts and values. Addiction to dopamine.

Political mean-spiritedness. Pain caused by the Church. Moral relativism. Apathy. Tyranny of the crowd.  
Decline of liberal arts education. The lies of social media. (Mobs. Courts. Chains. Storms. Caesar.))

-I'm struck by Paul's simple freedom in every daunting situation. You may wish to find this passage in the fourth chapter of his letter to the Church in Philippi and tape it on the dashboard of your car or post it above your bathroom mirror. Paul writes this: 11...I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. 12 I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation.... 13 I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength. (Philippians 4.11-13)

The Book of Acts closes without closing. The gospel has reached Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and now the symbolic center of the empire and ends of the earth. Nothing has stopped it. And now Luke invites us to enter the story. We are Acts 29 waiting on the day Christ's kingdom comes on earth. Now we're invited to step into the gospel story and trust. Now we're invited to believe beyond the edges of what we can see. To rest in hope and pray thanksgiving in every setback. To celebrate the unstoppable movement of the good news of Jesus through suffering, opposition, and empire. From Jerusalem, to Judea and Samaria, to the Mediterranean, to Rome, and now to the heart of Missoula, Montana, as we seek together to surprise our city with Christ's astonishing love.

Even as we encounter our own mobs, courts, chains, storms and Caesar, we are – you and I are - invited by this story to shout out the secret of being content in any and every situation: We can do all things through Christ who gives us strength.

Amen? Amen. Hallelujah? Hallelujah!!!

The hymn 'It Is Well with My Soul' was written by Horatio Spafford. He wrote the song in the 1870s out of staggering personal loss.

Spafford was a successful lawyer and Presbyterian elder in Chicago. He was a friend of evangelist Dwight L. Moody. But within a few years, tragedy overwhelmed his family. In 1871, much of his real estate investment was destroyed in the Great Chicago Fire. Around the same time, his young son died of scarlet fever.

Two years later, in 1873, Spafford planned a trip to Europe with his family. Delayed by business, he sent his wife Anna and their four daughters ahead by ship aboard the SS Ville du Havre while he planned to follow later. During the Atlantic crossing, the ship collided with another vessel and sank rapidly. More than 200 people died.

Anna survived. Their four daughters did not.

When Anna reached Wales, she sent Horatio a brief telegram that famously read: 'Saved alone.' Spafford immediately boarded a ship to cross the Atlantic to be with his grieving wife. During the voyage the captain informed him when they were passing near the place where his daughters had died. It was there, in the midst of grief and unanswered questions, that Spafford began writing the words that became this hymn:

When peace like a river attendeth my way,  
when sorrows like sea billows roll...

Whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say  
It is well, it is well, with my soul

What makes this hymn so enduring is that it is not a denial of dispiriting loss and fearsome circumstance. The song names sorrow honestly. But it roots peace in Christ, hope in Christ, joy in Christ, somewhere deeper than circumstances. The gospel endures through tears. Our hope overcomes. The kingdom is coming.

Friends, once again, we can do all things through Christ alive, the Lord of Love, who gives us strength.  
Let's sing our hope...

[Sing It is Well]