

The Unending Story

PHBF 06.08.08

TEXT: Acts 27-28

SCR. READING: Acts 27:1-44

SERIES: Acts-The Relentless Spread of the Gospel

THESIS: The book of Acts comes to an end, but the spread of the gospel has not.

PURPOSE: To inspire our church members to write the next chapter in the unending story of the relentless spread of the gospel

[Begin with a word of thanks on our 1-year anniversary...]

Fifty-nine weeks and thirty-five sermons ago, we started our journey through the book of Acts, and today that trek comes to an end. Today we will reach the end of Acts... sort of. It's a strange ending, almost no ending at all. It makes you wonder if Luke had more to say, but he just ran out of scroll. Let's look at it...

[Read ch 28:1-31.]

Isn't that odd? What happens to Paul? Does he testify before Caesar? Does he get out of prison? Does he die? Does he ever get to Spain? Apparently, Luke wasn't interested in giving us those answers. Apparently, they aren't relevant to his purpose for the book. As we'll see, he ended exactly how he wanted to, and he had a very important reason for doing it like that—a reason that has profound implications for our own lives almost 2,000 years later.

[Pray.]

If you have taken an American literature class of any merit, you are probably familiar with Frank Stockton's classic short story "The Lady or the Tiger." For those who need a refresher, it's the tale of an ancient, semi-barbaric king and his most unusual means of administering justice. Anyone convicted of a serious crime was placed in an arena where his only path of escape was through one of two identical doors. Behind one door was a beautiful woman; behind the other, however, was a ferocious tiger. The criminal had to choose one door or the other. If he guessed well and selected the door with the woman behind it, he was declared innocent and was required to marry the lady. But if he picked

the door with the tiger behind it, he was deemed guilty and immediately paid the price with his life.

One day the king learned that his daughter had fallen in love with a young man far beneath her station. The king was enraged and threw the offender in prison, determined to try the young man's case in the arena. On the day of his trial, the suitor looked up into the crowd and found the face of his beloved princess, searching her face for some indication of which door to pick. The princess did, in fact, know which door concealed the woman and which one the tiger; but she was faced with an awful crisis. If she indicated the door with the tiger, her love would be killed on the spot; if she indicated the door with the lady, however, he would live but be forced to marry another woman. After a moment's pause, she indicates a door. Her young lover nods slightly, then strides confidently forward to the door she signaled and throws it open.

At this point the dismayed reader is confronted, not with an ending for good or bad, but with a question: "Which came out of the opened door - the lady, or the tiger?"

The classic example of a story with no end. It's unsettling, isn't it? Inquiring minds want to know! We demand closure. But it's an unended story.

Just like Acts. But Acts isn't actually unended, as though Luke left off his conclusion—the rest of the story about what happened to Paul. See, Acts isn't about Paul; Acts is about the relentless spread of the gospel, and in that sense, it's not an *unended* story; it's an *unending* story. Luke's closing mark of punctuation was an ellipsis (...), not a period. Why? Because the story of the spread of the gospel isn't over.

SLIDE: quote

"Luke's description of Paul preaching 'with boldness' and 'without hindrance' symbolizes a wide open door, through which we in our day have to pass. The Acts of the Apostles have long ago finished. But the acts of the followers of Jesus will continue until the end of the world, and their words will spread to the ends of the earth." ~ Stott, 405

Acts 28:31 is not really a conclusion; it's an invitation to a new beginning. My goal this morning is to motivate you to dream bigger dreams, pray bigger prayers, and risk bigger risks for the sake of the gospel. What chapter will you write in the story of the relentless spread of the gospel?

Look again at the key text:

Acts 28:30-31 ³⁰ He [Paul] lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, ³¹ proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.

Here are two keys to adding our own chapter to the Unending Story:

- Obedience (of you and me) – “proclaiming... and teaching... with all boldness”
- Providence (of God) – “without hindrance”

These two themes run through the whole book of Acts and hold it together like rebar.

SLIDE: point 1

1. Obedience – “with all boldness” v 31

Many qualities of this remarkable man stand out in chapters 27-28:

- His leadership during the storm (27:1-44)
- His balance as a man of faith and a man of action, common sense and Spirit-wrought wisdom (27:1-44)
- His miracle-working power on the island of Malta (28:1-10)
- His love of Christian fellowship (28:11-15)

But Luke chooses to end—and thus emphasize—Paul’s evangelistic fervor. It’s interesting that, after v 15, we don’t read another word about Paul’s fellowship with the church at Rome. Odd, isn’t it, since he had written them the great Epistle to the Romans several years earlier? It’s likely that he did fellowship with other believers, but Luke ignores that in keeping with the primary theme of his book—the spread of the gospel.

Luke emphasizes “boldness” at the end of v 31, but obviously underneath that boldness was a simply determination to OBEY JESUS.

In the theme verse of Acts is 1:8, Jesus said: “*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.*”

Paul’s whole post-conversion life is simply one colossal act of obedience to that directive from the Lord Jesus.

Look at Paul’s example. He’s in Rome 3 days and he calls together the local Jewish leaders to explain his case (vv 17-20). The case means very little to them, but his Christianity intrigues them, so they return and bring others to hear more about it (vv 21-22). So what does Paul do?

Acts 28:23 *When they had appointed a day for him, they came to him at his lodging in greater numbers. From morning till evening he expounded to them, testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus both from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets.*

And when they don’t listen, does he give up? Hardly.

Acts 28:28-31 *“...Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.”* ²⁹ ³⁰ He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, ³¹ proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness

Philippians tells us that Paul even witnessed to his guards!

Philippians 1:12-13 ¹² Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. ¹³ As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ.

Here’s the point: Jesus told Paul to preach the gospel to every creature, and Paul obeyed. See, friends, basically it comes down to this when we talk about writing our chapter of “The Unending Story”: will we obey God, or won’t we? The command “Go and make disciples” came from the LORD Jesus Christ, and we need to be reminded that He is the One Person in the universe who has never lost an argument, renegotiated a contract, or apologized for being unreasonable.

Now, if you are feeling the weight of conviction right now because you know you do not obey in this area as you ought, I need to remind you that the gospel is not just the message others need to hear *from you*. It is also the message God wants to send right now *to you*. Two aspects:

1. We need the gospel for forgiveness for our sin of disobedience.

If the Holy Spirit has pricked your heart and reminded you of your sin, let me also remind you that Jesus died and rose again so sinners could be forgiven. Disobedient sinners like you and sinners like me.

2. We need the gospel for empowerment.

SLIDE: quote

“Run, John, run! The Law commands!
But gives me neither feet nor hands.
Far grander news the Gospel brings:
It bids me fly and gives me wings!” ~ John Bunyan

Obedience is behavior that conforms to the gospel (cf. Phil 1:27).

Philippians 2:7-8 *And being found in human form, ^s he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.*

So the next chapter in The Unending Story depends upon our obedience. But it also depends even more upon God’s providence.

SLIDE: point 2

2. Providence – “without hindrance” v 31

Verse 31 ends with the phrase “without hindrance.” Paul’s testimony to the gospel was unhindered. Why? Because God, in His providence, removed every obstacle. Paul was in shackles, but the God who rules the universe was not!

SLIDE: definition

“Providence” refers to God’s gracious superintending activity over all things (including human actions) which brings both history and creation to its divinely determined goal. Basically, the doctrine of providence means God is in charge and whatever He ordains, He does.

We have seen God’s providence at work all through the book of Acts. God’s providence delivered the apostles from a beating in chapter 4 and surrendered them to a beating in chapter 5. It was providence that appointed James’ for death and Peter for deliverance in chapter 12. But God’s providence takes center stage as we move toward the end of the book.

Just consider this matter of Paul’s journey to Rome. Circumstance after circumstance demonstrated that God was in charge. Since Paul stated his intention to go to Rome, he was...

- Arrested in Jerusalem
- Subjected to multiple trials
- Threatened with assassination by a band of zealots
- Bribed by Felix
- Nearly lost at sea in a storm
- Nearly killed by soldiers
- Bitten by a poisonous snake

Two evidences of providence in chapters 27-28.

- 27:1-28:5 – the storm and the snakebite incident
- 28:17-31 – the rejection of the gospel by the Jews

The most obvious is God’s providential care for Paul through the storm and the snakebite incident. Here is an indisputable demonstration that God is in charge, and Paul is just as safe (or no safer!) on board a storm-tossed ship as he is on a sandy beach. Luke obviously wants us to connect Paul’s rescue with God’s care, because he repeatedly uses the word “salvation” throughout the narrative (cf. 27:20, 31, 34, 43, 44; 28:1, 4).

The other demonstration of God’s providence is in the rejection of Paul’s message by the Jews. Why didn’t they believe? Paul quotes Isaiah 6:9-10 and lays the blame directly at their feet. THEY are responsible for rejecting his message.

But interestingly, John quotes that same verse – Isaiah 6:10 – and shifts the blame to Someone else:

SLIDE: Scripture

John 12:37-40 ³⁷ Even after Jesus had done all these miraculous signs in their presence, they still would not believe in him. ³⁸ This was to fulfill the word of Isaiah the prophet: "Lord, who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?" ³⁹ For this reason they could not believe, because, as Isaiah says elsewhere: ⁴⁰ "He has blinded their eyes and deadened their hearts, so they can neither see with their eyes, nor understand with their hearts, nor turn-- and I would heal them."

So here's the question: Was the Jews' unbelief due to their rebellion or God's providence? The answer is "YES!"

Here's the point: God is in absolute control of everyone and everything everywhere all the time. Practically, here's what all this means. When you step out in faith to write the next chapter in the unending story, you can be certain that you are stepping out with the *God who reigns!*

Let Acts give you a glimpse of the absolute authority and unqualified sovereignty of our God! He is subject to none, influenced by none, dependent upon none. He does always exactly as He pleases:

SLIDE: Scripture

Isaiah 46:9-11 *I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me,* ¹⁰ *declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose,'* ¹¹ *calling a bird of prey from the east, the man of my counsel from a far country. I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass; I have purposed, and I will do it.*

Were all the denizens of heaven and all the inhabitants of the earth to combine in revolt against Him, it would occasion Him no uneasiness, and would have less effect upon His eternal and unassailable Throne than has the spray of Mediterranean's waves upon the towering rocks of Gibraltar. So puerile and powerless is the creature to affect the Most High, Scripture itself tells us that when the Gentile heads unite with apostate Israel to defy Jehovah and His Christ, "He that sitteth in the heavens shall *laugh*" (Ps. 2:4). ~ Arthur Pink, *The Attributes of God*

The story is unfinished, friends. Our sovereign God has ordained that more pages be filled and more chapters be written. Will you write in them by your life for His glory? Your part and God's part. Obedience and providence.

CONCLUSION:

In the England of the mid-1600s, a preacher of John Bunyan's low education and variant beliefs was not authorized to preach publicly. But Bunyan wouldn't quit. When the authorities demanded he refrain from preaching to his congregation in Bedford or go to jail, he replied: "If nothing will do unless I make of my conscience a continual butchery and slaughter-shop, unless, putting out my own eyes, I commit me to the blind to lead me, as I doubt not is desired by some, I have determined, the Almighty God being my help and shield, yet to suffer, if frail life might continue so long, even till the moss shall grow on mine eye-brows, rather than thus to violate my faith and principles." In other words, "NO!" He obeyed God, and so they threw him in jail for 12 years.

And in God's providence, while he was locked away in jail unable to preach to his congregation, he wrote to them instead. And one of the many works he penned during those years became one of the best selling books in all the world, second only to the Bible itself: *Pilgrim's Progress*.

Obedience and providence, together writing another chapter in the relentless spread of the gospel. Now it's up to me and you. The story isn't finished yet, and now it's our turn. Someday in eternity we'll read the whole story, Acts chapters 29-infinity. What will the chapter called "Parker Hills Bible Fellowship" say?