

The Church's Enduring Witness

Acts 28:17-31

When I think about the novels on my shelf at home, my favorite chapter in each one, almost without exception, is the last chapter. I don't read a ton of novels, so maybe that indicates a lack of literary sophistication on my part. But the last chapter is what brings the story together. It's the wrap-up, the conclusion, the resolution of all of the suspense and drama and tension in the story. That moment when you feel like you can finally breathe, because you know what happened. The twists finally make sense. And often the protagonist walks away victorious. I think of the last chapter of *The Last Battle*, the final book in Lewis' Narnia series. I can't get through it without tears. And I remember the first time I read it to Joshua when he was 5; his immediate response was, 'Read it again, dad! Read it again.'

There's a vindication, a resolution, a success. And that feels good—not necessarily because you're ready to move on from the book. In fact, if it's done really well, a good conclusion brings a resolution to the story that leaves you wanting more. You're kind of sad that the story is over. And you have this sense that there's really more to tell.

This morning we conclude our series in Acts by looking at the last chapter. The resolution of Luke's great two-volume work on Jesus and his church. Now of course this is not the last chapter of Paul's story, nor of the church's story. In fact, this final chapter of Acts feels marvelously incomplete. It genuinely leaves you wanting more, knowing that there is more to the story than what's recorded here. Just as chapter one of Acts wasn't really the beginning of the story, but a continuation of "all that Jesus began to do and teach"—now carried on by his church in the power and presence of the Spirit—so chapter 28 isn't really the end. The gospel story continues.

But, the book doesn't. The book does in fact end here. And as the conclusion, you expect some resolution to the driving point of the story. You expect to find out, was the mission successful? The charge, back in ch. 1:8, to bear witness to Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth? Was the mission successful?

It depends on how you define success. If by success you mean Paul finally making it to Rome, then sure. The last eight chapters have followed his journey from Jerusalem to Rome, through all sorts of perilous situations. But if by success, you mean that all who once opposed the message of Christ have come to their senses and gotten on board and stopped their persecuting ways, then no—the story ends with Paul still imprisoned by the Roman authorities, under house arrest. And if by success, you mean that everyone who hears the message of the gospel believes it and is saved, then no. The story ends with a pretty direct rejection of the gospel by those who ought to have been most eager to hear it. And if by success, you mean the completion of the mission, that the gospel has reached its geographical terminus, then no. There are so many who still haven't heard by the end of the book. In that sense, the last chapter of Acts feels like a bit of a letdown.

But if we let this final chapter define success for us; if, instead of imposing our expectations onto Luke's conclusion and walking away underwhelmed; if we let Luke's conclusion tell *us* what to expect in terms of ministry success in the world, then a pretty startling yet settling picture begins to appear. A picture marked by an *unashamed loyalty* and an *enduring witness* to Israel's Messiah, Jesus.

It's the question of Paul's loyalty to Israel that has gotten him into trouble, and ultimately landed him in Rome. As we noted last week, it was the accusation in Jerusalem back in ch. 21 that started the whole thing: "This is the man who is teaching everyone everywhere against the people and the law and this place [the temple]. Moreover, he even brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place" (21:28), which of course wasn't true (21:29). But as a result of this accusation Paul was arrested, and so far has had to testify before the Jewish council in Jerusalem (as we saw last week, 22:30-23:11), before the Felix the Governor in Caesarea (24:1-27), and then again before Festus who replaced Felix (25:1-12), and again before King Agrippa (26:1-32), none of whom found him guilty of any charge, certainly not deserving of death (23:29; 25:18-19, 25; 26:31-32). Yet his accusers wouldn't relent, so it was only by appealing to his Roman citizenship, and ultimately appealing to Caesar, that Paul was able to escape from being killed. And now that he has finally made it to Rome, just three days in he summons the local Jewish leaders to make an apologetic that he is deeply loyal to Israel—that it is in fact his loyalty to Israel and to the hope of Israel that has gotten him into trouble.

The Apologetic of Paul's Loyalty to Israel (28:17-22)

In vv. 17-22, he calls the local Jewish leaders to make his case. He invites his accusers to face him. And he defends his innocence and loyalty to Israel in three ways. First, he declares his innocence regarding Jewish customs: "though I had done nothing against our people or the customs of our fathers, yet I was delivered as a prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans" (v. 17). Despite the fact that Paul understood that one is not justified by works of the law but by faith (cf. Gal. 2:16), that didn't mean he went around trashing the law. Or offending his Jewish brethren. The reports that he brought Gentiles into the temple weren't true; he is innocent with regard to Israel's customs.

Second, he is innocent with regard to Rome's investigation. "When they had examined me, they wished to set me at liberty, because there was no reason for the death penalty in my case" (28:18). Rome did not corroborate the Jewish accusations. They found them unconvincing, and wanted to let him go.

Then third, he is innocent with regard to his motives in appealing to Caesar. He did not appeal to Caesar, to the Roman Emperor, because he had a beef with his own people, or as a way to get back at them or cause trouble, but because his own people continued to want to kill him. "But *because the Jews objected* [to the Roman's desire to set him free], I was compelled to appeal to Caesar—though I had no charge to bring against my nation" (28:19). 'I'm not here for some sort of grudge or vendetta.' Paul is a loyal Jew. As he summarizes in v. 20: "it is *because* of the hope of Israel that I am wearing this chain"—not because I've rejected Israel or Judaism. And so he has nothing to hide from the local Jewish leaders.

And they, surprisingly, have nothing to accuse him of. No letters from Judea, no evil reports against him (v. 21). Though you wonder if they're genuinely ignorant of Paul or just playing coy. But they *are* interested in his views. Even if they haven't heard of Paul, they've heard of the Christians, and nothing they have heard has been good (v. 22). And so they desire to hear him.

But this whole first episode makes us ask a question. Why does Paul defend his innocence? Why make an apologetic for his loyalty to Israel? Why not just take the slander and count it all joy to be persecuted for Christ's sake? Isn't that what taking up your cross and following Jesus looks like? Jesus kept his mouth shut before his accusers, so isn't it a bit petty and self-serving to be so defensive? Why does Paul defend his innocence here?

Because, it's his loyalty to Israel that compels him to worship Jesus, and his loyalty to Israel that he hopes will give him a voice with his Jewish brothers and sisters. Look again at v. 20: "For this reason, therefore, I have asked to see you and speak with you, since it is *because* of the hope of Israel that I am wearing this chain." Again, Paul is not proclaiming Jesus out of rebellion to Israel, but because he is loyal to Israel, and *Jesus is the hope of Israel*. In fact, now that God has answered his promises and sent his messiah, loyalty to Israel is no longer marked by adherence to the law, but by faith in the Messiah who fulfilled the law. And so Paul defends *his* loyalty in order to appeal to *their* loyalty, and somehow convince them to follow Christ.

And there's an interesting application here for us in our mission to make Christ known. I mean, we're all tempted to defend ourselves against accusations. That part is not hard to do. But is what we're defending our own reputation before the world, or our right to speak into the world? Paul's not concerned about his reputation here. He has no problem being slandered or written off as scum of the earth (cf. 1 Cor. 4:13). He's concerned about retaining his voice among the Jews, as long as he can, in order to declare the gospel of Christ.

There are times when in order to gain or retain a hearing with someone, it's wise to defend our innocence. To refute false charges. Which of course requires living with integrity in the first place. As Peter says in 1 Peter 2:12, "Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation." As we talked about last week, to live in such a way that the accusations won't stick.

And there are also times, in order to gain or retain a hearing with someone, to appeal to a common loyalty. To help them see that if they really care about this thing we're both committed to, then they're going to want to follow Jesus, because he's the only way to truly accomplish that. For instance, it's not uncommon for Christians to be criticized or written off because of our belief in hell—God's wrath and the judgment to come—because that sounds so unfair and unloving. Why would a loving God send anyone to hell? Whoever believes that must be entirely unloving and uninterested in justice. But it's actually our loyalty to love and justice that compels us to believe in and speak of God's judgment. Because his judgment is fueled by love and justice. A love that gets angry at the injustice of this world and commits to do something about it, to make it right. In fact, if you're really committed to justice, then you should look to God to establish it. Because none of our human efforts will ever be able to truly solve the injustices of this world. Only God is holy enough to render righteous verdicts; only God is powerful enough to make right what is wrong. Only God's love is deep enough to guarantee him to act.

Our belief in divine justice should not disqualify the church from having a voice in the public square. We're not rebelling against justice or love; it's our loyalty to justice and love that compels us to uphold God's judgment. Don't be afraid to defend your right to speak and bear witness to Christ in a world that slanders you in effort to silence the gospel. Paul defends his right to speak.

But don't be surprised if people still reject you, or continue to refuse to hear. Because that's what happens in the next scene, when the Jewish leaders gather to hear Paul's views.

An Apologetic for Jesus as Israel's Hope (28:23-28)

In vv. 23-28, the local Jewish leaders and others are gathered where Paul is staying "in great numbers," and Paul, having defended his loyalty to Israel's hope, now declares to his brothers and sisters the identity of that hope: Jesus Christ. He makes an apologetic for Jesus as the fulfillment of Israel's hope.

"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" (28:23). And just a detail in that verse I don't want us to miss: "from morning to evening." You all thing my sermons are long sometimes? *Morning to evening*. You've got nothing to complain about!

But the duration of time is simply reflective of the urgency and importance of the content. Paul doesn't want his brothers and sisters in Judaism to miss out on the fulfillment of their faith. If they want to be loyal to Israel, they must be loyal to her king, Jesus. And so he testifies to the kingdom of God, and tries to convince them about Jesus—that Jesus is the fulfillment of Israel's hope. What God promised to their forefathers he has accomplished in the life, death, and resurrection of his eternal Son, Jesus. And Paul bases his argument on Israel's own Scripture. It's remarkable: just as Luke's first volume ended with Jesus, "beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, [interpreting] to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself" (Lk. 24:27), so now Luke's second volume ends with Paul doing the exact same thing.

What God envisioned for his creation—his people, reflecting his image, enjoying his presence, obeying his rule, filling the earth with his glory—what was then compromised in the fall, Jesus renews and restores through his life, death, and resurrection (Gen. 1:26-28; 1 Cor. 15:42-49).

What God promised Abraham, to make him into a great nation, and to bless all nations on earth through him, he has accomplished through Jesus, the seed of Abraham, in whom we become children of Abraham through faith (Gen. 12:1-3; 22:15-18; Gal. 3:7-9, 16, 27-29).

What God accomplished for Israel in the Passover and exodus, redeeming his people from slavery and sin through the blood of a perfect substitute, he has accomplished for all people for all time with the priceless and precious blood of Jesus (Exod. 12; Heb. 10:14; 1 Pet. 1:17-18).

What God promised David, that one of his descendants would sit on the throne forever, ruling God's people as his Son, he has fulfilled by sending Jesus, the Son of David, whose body did not see decay, and who is right now seated at the right hand of the Father, reigning from heaven (2 Sam. 7:1-17; Ps. 16:1-11; Acts 2:22-36).

What God promised through the prophets—to redeem his people from idolatry, to raise them from spiritual death, to forgive their sins and cleanse their hearts, to fill them with his Spirit—and not just Israel, but all nations and people groups—he has fulfilled in Jesus (e.g., Isa. 49:6-7; Jer. 31:31-34; Ezek. 37:1-14).

He is the prophet like Moses who speaks all God’s words (Deut. 18:15-18); the root of Jesse, who will establish justice on the earth (Isa. 11:1-10). He is the suffering servant, bruised for our iniquity (Isa. 53); the forsaken king, whose hands and feet were pierced (Ps. 22).

He is the hope of Israel, and every nation. As Paul said earlier to Agrippa, back in ch. 26, “I stand here testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass: that the Christ must suffer and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles” (26:22-23).

And we’re told in v. 24 that some were convinced by what he said. They saw the connection between promise and fulfillment, that following Jesus wasn’t rebelling against their Jewish heritage but embracing the fulfillment of it. And so they believed. That’s the kind of end to the story we’re looking for, right? People getting saved! Mission accomplished! Wouldn’t it be nice if Luke stopped there?

“Some were convinced by what he said, *but others disbelieved.*” Not everyone who hears the word is going to respond to the word in faith. If you define success by convincing everyone of what you’re preaching, you’re going to be disappointed. It’s not going to happen. And I think we all know that. But it doesn’t make it easy. It’s hard when you’ve invested yourself so deeply in someone, to watch some people reject that word and walk away from it all. But it will happen. And it doesn’t mean that the word is failing. Some will believe, and others will not. That’s what happens here.

But then it actually gets worse. The whole situation seems to fall apart. Those who were convinced and those who disbelieved were disagreeing with themselves, and then they all take off after Paul drops this bomb on them, v. 25:

“The Holy Spirit was right in saying to your fathers through Isaiah the prophet: ‘Go to this people, and say, “You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive.” For this people’s heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed; lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them.’ Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.” (28:25-28)

I’m not sure which is more offensive to a Jewish audience: associating them with their spiritually deaf and blind ancestors in Isaiah 6, or announcing that the Gentiles are more spiritually open to God’s salvation than they are. I’m pretty sure you’re going to lose your audience either way.

So why is Paul so offensive here? Does he just lose his temper? Like a teacher whose lost control of the classroom, and so he just slams the textbook on the desk? Or like the school kid whose tire of losing the game, so he just takes his ball to go home? He was so careful to defend his loyalty earlier, and argue for his right to have a voice among the Jews—to build capital; why does he go

and spend it all here? Throw away everything he built up by dropping a grenade at the end of his speech and clearing the room?

Because, while there is a time to defend our innocence or appeal to a common loyalty in order to gain or retain a hearing with someone and try to persuade them of Christ, there is also a time to call out people's guilt and expose their disloyalty to God, lest they presume upon his acceptance, when they in fact remain under his condemnation. To let the sharp edge of the gospel be felt, so that no one can walk away and claim they did not know, that they were unaware of the implications of rejecting Christ.

That's what the God is doing in the passage Paul quotes from Isaiah—Isaiah 6, the message Isaiah is given to deliver when he says to God, "Here I am, send me" (Isa. 6:1-13). He sends his prophet to deliver a sharp word of condemnation, not because he's done with Israel, but in order to provoke those who remain to repentance and faith. In the same way, Paul is not being a jerk here. He's not trying to be angular or edgy; he is passionately pleading for repentance and faith, and calling them out directly for their lack of it. It is a prophetic word.

And we need to be willing, in our ministry of the word, to call for a response to the gospel, and to warn people of the implications of not responding. Which will invariably offend some people. You will lose the voice you've worked so hard to gain. But don't let it be because *you're* offensive. Make sure it's because the gospel is offensive.

And don't be afraid of the gospel's offense. Sometimes in our effort to gain a hearing in a world that wants to silence us, we worry so much about nuance and posture, that we never really get around to saying what the gospel says. We're afraid that if we go there, we're going to lose our voice with that person. But what's the point of building capital if you never use it? What's the point of keeping your voice if you never preach the gospel? Whose reputation are you really protecting?

Yes, be nuanced. Be wise, winsome. Build bridges. Don't be a jerk. But don't be afraid, having done that, to say what the gospel says, and call people to a response. Because at the end of the day, no amount of nuance is going to keep you from public slander once they discover what you really believe.

Success as a church isn't marked by the world's accolades, or even racking up a number of conversions. No, if the conclusion to Acts gives us any indication, success means unashamed loyalty and enduring witness to Christ and his kingdom.

Enduring Witness to Christ (28:30-31)

And that's the final note of the book—Paul's enduring witness. While he redirects his evangelistic efforts to the Gentiles in Rome in v. 28 (as he did previously in Pisidian Antioch, 13:46; Corinth, 18:6; and Ephesus, 19:8-9), at the same time, Luke tells us, that while he lived in Rome, he "welcomed all who came to him" (v. 30). The *all* there is almost certainly a hat tip to both Jews and Gentiles. Despite such an overwhelming rejection of his message, he keeps preaching. To anyone who will hear his message. He keeps "proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance" (v. 31).

And look at those last couple of words: “with all boldness and without hindrance.” There is a very real sense in which the word of God prevails in this book. It continues to multiply through the bold, Spirit-empowered proclamation of his people. Despite opposition, despite rejection. He keeps preaching.

And that’s my prayer for Westgate. Keep preaching the Word. From the pulpit, in the classroom, over the dinner table, at the water cooler. Proclaim God’s word with all boldness, to one another, and to the world. This book has the Words of life. This book reveals the redemption of God in Jesus. “And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

So keep holding fast to God’s Word, and keep holding it out to others. There is a time when you’ll have to make a case for your innocence and your right to speak on spiritual matters—to build capital. And there is a time, in proclaiming salvation through Jesus, to spend that capital, and warn others of the dangers of rejecting Christ, that people might have a real sense of the condemnation that waits for them apart from Jesus. But whatever you do, keep your eyes on Jesus, and keep preaching the Word. That is your measure of success: unashamed loyalty to Christ, and an enduring witness to him and his kingdom. That is a chapter I’m happy to read over and over and over again in the church’s story. It’s a chapter that I pray is more and more true of each of our lives.