

GOD'S SAVING PURPOSES PREVAIL TO ADVANCE HIS KINGDOM Acts 28:17-31

INTRODUCTION

Millions of people who are not currently citizens of the U.S.A. want to be citizens of the U.S.A. Our country has always provided a legal way for people who want to be citizens to become citizens. There has always been a legal process through which a person can become a part of the American family, a member of the American kingdom, a citizen of our country. No individual has the right or the ability to become a citizen through a process of their own devising. The only way to become a legal member of our society is by submitting to the process established by our laws.

In much the same way there is only one way to become a member of God's kingdom, a citizen of his country, a member of his family. He alone has the right to establish the means or the process by which those who are not members of his kingdom become members of his kingdom. The book of Acts begins with the resurrected Jesus, over a period of 40 days, explaining to his twelve disciples the nature of God's kingdom. He was explaining to them the process by which people became members of his kingdom, the requirements of citizenship in his kingdom and all the benefits which come to those who are members of his kingdom. The book of Acts ends in a very similar way. Paul is explaining to the leaders of the Jewish community and then to anyone who would come to him in Rome the nature of the kingdom of God. Look at vv. 23 and 30-31.

This ending to the book of Acts is quite surprising. Beginning in the middle of chapter 21 when the Roman soldiers rescued Paul from the mob of Jewish people who attacked him in the temple we have been watching the process by which God has brought Paul to Rome to appear before the Roman Emperor to prove his innocence and proclaim the gospel. However, Luke ends his book without telling us if Paul ever appeared before Caesar and if he did, what happened? Instead, Luke ends his book by telling us that Paul preached to the Jewish leaders for a whole day about the kingdom of God as established by the person and work of Jesus, then he records Paul's last word to them, a quotation from the prophet Isaiah and ends by telling us that Paul lived under house arrest for two years and proclaimed the message about God's kingdom being established by the Lord Jesus Christ without hindrance to anyone who would come to listen to him during that time.

The fact that Luke begins and ends this book connecting the person and work of Jesus with the kingdom of God tells us that the book of Acts is the story of how God's kingdom has been established by Jesus and is being advanced in the world by Jesus. In this way Acts is simply another chapter in the whole story of the Bible which is the story of how God is manifesting his greatness through his work to establish his kingdom on this rebellious planet by placing his king on his holy hill from where he will destroy all his enemies and save all of his people by bringing them safely into his eternal kingdom of peace.

I presume that this morning, most of you want to be a member of God's kingdom. You want to know that God loves you and is for you and is going to bring you safely into his eternal kingdom. In this desire you are not different from the vast majority of people living in the world. Most people not only desire to be a part of God's family but presume that they are a part of God's family. Most people in the world, like the Jewish leaders to whom Paul speaks, presume that God is planning on welcoming them into his eternal kingdom. However, what Luke shows us in this final story from the life of Paul is that membership in God's kingdom is obtained in only one way. This final scene in Luke's account of Paul's life is a description of how it is that God is advancing his kingdom and thus a description of how it is that we enter and live in and obtain the benefits of the glorious kingdom of God.

MAIN POINT

God advances his kingdom, his salvation, his healing through...

I. Churches and Christians who, like Jesus, joyfully suffer for the joy of others (vv. 17-22)

Three days after Paul arrives in Rome he invites the leaders of the Jewish community in Rome to come visit him in his rented quarters where he is chained to a Roman soldier from the Imperial guard. Here is what I want to say to Luke as I read this ending to Acts: “Really, Luke, this is the most important thing you have to tell us about Paul’s two year stay in Rome?” I also want to say to Paul, “Really, Paul, talking to the leaders of the Jewish community is what you first want to do? You are chained to this Roman soldier because of the Jews. It has been the Jewish people and their leaders who have most often tried to kill you during your travels. Really, this is the best use of your time, the audience which will most likely respond well to your message?” Why does Paul do this and why does Luke tell us about it, in fact, end his book with it?

Look at what Paul says to these Jewish leaders. First, he wants to make clear that he is innocent of any wrongdoing, either against the Jewish people or against Roman law. He himself is Jewish and did not in any way attack the Jewish people or the customs their fathers passed down to them. Don’t miss what Paul is claiming. He is saying that in preaching that only through faith in Jesus do people become members of God’s kingdom he is not attacking Judaism. His message and life is in full accord with the truth contained in the OT. In addition, the Romans, after investigating the charges against him declared him innocent and wanted to release him. Thus, like Jesus, he is under arrest by the Romans and opposed by the Jews for no reason. He is innocent. The second thing Paul emphasizes is that while he is innocent, yet it is because of the opposition of his fellow Jews that he is in this situation. They are the ones who handed him over to the Romans and when the Romans wanted to free him, they objected and thus forced him to appeal to Caesar. Again, this is just like Jesus who was handed over to the Romans by the Jews and when Pilate wanted to set him free, they objected. The only difference between Jesus and Paul at this point is that because he is a Roman citizen he was able to thwart the Jewish leaders plans by appealing to Rome, whereas Jesus, being only Jewish had no right of appeal and was thus crucified by Pilate.

The third thing that Paul wants them to know is that the reason he appealed to Caesar was not so he could get revenge on the Jews who had unjustly attacked him and falsely accused him of wrongdoing. Paul had a criminal and civil case that he could bring against the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem. However he had no intention of pressing charges against them even though they had unjustly attacked him. Finally, Paul tells them why it is that he wants to talk with these Jewish leaders. He tells them that the reason he is in this situation, the reason the Jewish leadership handed him over and the reason they objected and thus the reason he had to appeal is because his mission in life is to declare and make plain the hope of Israel.

It is in that phrase, “the hope of Israel,” that we learn why Paul wants to talk with the Jewish community the moment he comes to Rome. The hope of Israel refers to the promise that is contained in the OT that one day God was going to send the “male son of the woman” who would be the male son of Abraham, who would be the prophet like Moses, who would be the Son of David, who would be king over God’s people forever and their protector and refuge, who would be Israel, who would be the servant of the Lord, who would be the Lord himself coming to his people. When this anointed one, this Messiah came he would send forth the HS to renew all God’s people so that they would obey God’s law, so they would become his holy people and this King would cause the people of God to flourish and enjoy God as God intended and would give the earth to the people of God. It is this hope for which Paul suffers and it is this hope that he longs to declare to the Jewish people. Thus we see in Paul, the same ambition that ruled the heart of Jesus who came give his life in order that all of his lost sheep might be brought home to God to the glory of his Father. So Paul, as he says in Romans 9-11 longs for and works for the salvation of his fellow Jews because the promises were first addressed to them and thus, in every city he makes sure that they get to hear the gospel first.

Jesus loved his enemies by dying for them. Paul loves his enemies by telling them that the Messiah has come and died and sent forth his Spirit. Paul does this no matter what it costs him. Just think about it, the book of Acts ends describing Paul’s four year imprisonment by Rome for the sake of this good news about Jesus as

contained in the OT. He is not out to demand his rights but to proclaim this good news of amnesty and forgiveness to believing sinners so that all God's people might enter into that glorious kingdom. As he says in 2 Timothy, he endures all things for the sake of the elect so that they may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory. This is how God's kingdom advances, as the church, as Christians endure all manner of hardship and suffering and refuse to demand their rights in order to proclaim the good news that what God has promised he has done. We are not all called to be missionaries but we are all called to not take revenge, to not demand our rights so that we can bear witness by life and by word to the greatness and the glory of Jesus.

II. Preaching Christ from the whole Bible (vv. 20, 23, 26)

The leaders for their part are eager to hear Paul as they have not heard anything negative from the Jewish community in Jerusalem about him and they are very aware that throughout the Roman Empire Jewish communities everywhere have been opposing the message of Christ, which Paul preaches (vv.21-22). They realize they have a rare opportunity, to, as it were, get it straight from the horse's mouth. They seem to have some knowledge of Paul's authority in the Christian sect and thus recognize they can get a true description of these claims and thus make up their own mind. So they together decide a day on which Paul will make his case. When the day arrives even more Jewish leaders come to listen to Paul. This is a commendable response by these Jewish leaders. Over the 35 years I have talking with people about the gospel of Christ the majority of people I've spoken with who have no interest in Jesus have never sought to understand Jesus. Most have not rejected the true Christ but a caricature of him and a poor one at that. Thus I would urge any who are present this morning who are not sure that Jesus is worthy of your life to make sure that you have a true understanding of who he is and what he has done before you make a decision to reject him. Be sure to talk with someone who knows what they are talking about before you turn your back on a Jesus who does not exist.

What Paul does for an entire day with these Jewish leaders is to testify to the kingdom of God by seeking to convince them that Jesus is the promised son of Abraham, prophet like Moses, Son of David and King of Israel from the entire OT. We are given examples of the kinds of things that he said to them in Peter's sermon in Jerusalem recorded in Acts 2 and in Paul's sermon in Antioch Pisidia as recorded in Acts 13 or by reading the gospels or the letters in the NT. He demonstrated that the OT taught that God's Messiah had to suffer and die, enduring the curse of God against the sins of all his people and that he must rise from the dead and ascend to the right hand of God and from there send forth his Holy Spirit to go into the world and renew the hearts of all God's chosen ones so that they might believe the gospel. He proved that only Jesus had fulfilled the conditions of the law and thus only he and those united to him by faith were legally entitled to the benefits of God's kingdom. He told them that the descendants of Abraham were not those who were physically descended from him, who had received the Law of Moses but that the descendants of Abraham were those who trusted in this Jesus in the same way that Abraham had trusted in God's promise to send this Jesus. He argued that Jesus was the one who both fulfilled everything written in the OT and that Jesus alone was able to make all the promises God made in the OT to come true.

Thus we see, as we have repeatedly seen in the book of Acts, that God's salvation, his healing, his kingdom advances in this world and in the hearts of his people by the proclamation of Jesus the King as he is set forth on the pages of this book. God's kingdom does not advance through the working of miracles or through the loving service of the church or through awesome worship music or through Walt Disney quality programs or through fighting abortion or through electing conservative or liberal politicians or through feeding the poor. The kingdom of God advances as rebel human hearts are converted to Christ and grow in their delight in him through churches and pastors and elders and parents and Christians who proclaim, teach and bear witness to this glorious King Jesus as he is revealed on every page of this book. Entry into the kingdom of God is through trusting in Jesus as he is revealed in the Bible and living as a faithful citizen of God's kingdom is only through growing to know and trust and love this same Jesus. Every true citizen of the kingdom of God yearns to know this Jesus better and thus gives himself or herself to the study of this book for the purpose of knowing and loving Jesus better. We don't read it so we can be smarter sinners or to prove to God or man that we are good Christians but we read and study so we can see him better and love him with greater fervency.

III. Faith in the Christ who is heard in the preaching (vv. 24-28)

Notice in vv. 24-25 what happens at the end of this day-long session with the apostle Paul teaching about Jesus and his kingdom from the pages of the OT. When these Jewish leaders came to see Paul they were all in agreement about the nature of God's kingdom and who belonged to that kingdom. However, after listening to Paul for the whole day a division occurs in this previously united group. Some of them are persuaded by Paul that Jesus is indeed the Son of David who makes those who trust in him fit for membership in God's kingdom. (This word translated, "were convinced" is used on three other occasions in Acts to describe people who had become Christians.) Others, however, did not believe what Paul told them about Jesus. They leave Paul arguing among themselves about whether or not the crucified man, Jesus, is indeed God's Messiah and if indeed membership in God's kingdom is obtained by faith in him and not through obedience to God's law.

Paul's final word to the disbelieving Jews was to quote Isaiah 6:9-10, which is a passage quoted by Jesus in Matthew 13 in answer to the 12 disciples asking Jesus about why he taught the people by using parables. In Isaiah these are the words of Yahweh to Isaiah after Isaiah volunteers to be God's spokesperson, his prophet to the people of Israel. Paul is obviously placing himself in the place of Isaiah. He is God's prophet who is announcing God's promise of salvation through faith in Christ alone, just like Isaiah and all the OT prophets did. These unbelieving Jews are showing that they are no different from the people of Israel throughout their entire history. God has talked with these people for thousands of years and most Jewish people for most of their history have not believed what God has said but resisted his word and rebelled against him. Just as in the days of Isaiah destruction is unavoidable. Just as Israel in the time of Isaiah ensured their own destruction by their hard-hearted refusal to listen to the gospel as preached by Isaiah, so these Jewish leaders are ensuring their just destruction by their refusal to believe that God's kingdom comes only to those who trust in Jesus.

The Jewish people throughout their history made the argument that because Abraham was their father and because God brought them out of Egypt and because God gave them the Law on Mt. Sinai through Moses and because they had the temple and the sacrifices—because of all these things they were members of God's kingdom. Paul by quoting Isaiah and Luke by recording this quotation tells them and us that membership in the kingdom of God is not given to those who hear the sound of preaching or who hear the words of Scripture read but those who believe what they hear. God does not reward people with heaven because they perform religious acts or pray or go to church or read their Bible or give money to the poor. The people for whom Jesus is king and who are made fit for membership in the eternal kingdom of God are those who do nothing but trust Jesus to do everything for them. It is only those who depend upon Christ to keep the law in their place and to be the one who bore God's wrath and curse against them for their sins who belong to the kingdom of God. You do not enter into God's kingdom by any moral or religious performance and you do not live in God's kingdom by your moral or religious performance. We enter and live in God's kingdom through trusting in, relying upon, embracing, resting in our King and Savior Jesus Christ. As we grow in our experiential knowledge of God's great love for us in the Christ revealed in the Bible we become better citizens of God's kingdom and it is by this means that God secures us and brings us safely into that eternal kingdom.

We all have ears and we all can hear the sound of my voice or the voice of your parents or others bearing witness to the kingdom of God, but do you hear? We all have eyes to read the Scriptures, but do you perceive? We all have hearts that know how to trust and love things and people and other pleasures of this world, but do we trust and love this Jesus? I beg you to not listen in vain. There is no salvation, no healing, no membership in the family and kingdom of God apart from your believing what you have heard of this great king and savior, Jesus. Recently Pastor Steve and I came across a little booklet published by the Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation called, "Listen Up! A practical guide to listening to sermons." We'd like you to pick up a copy on your way out of church this morning, to read it and to discuss it with your families. In our video, electronic media obsessed culture we are forgetting how to listen, this little booklet will help you to not just hear words spoken but to listen with faith.

IV. Sovereign Grace (vv.28-31)

Paul announces to these Jewish leaders something he announced on several other occasions in Acts when speaking to Jewish people who rejected the message of the gospel. He told them that the salvation of God, that is, his kingdom, his healing, his hope is now being sent to the Gentiles. Listen to how this same event is described in Acts 13:46-48: “And Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, saying, “It was necessary that the word of God be spoken first to you. Since you thrust it aside and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles... And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed.” Notice how both here and in v. 28 of our chapter that the sovereignty of God in saving sinners is emphasized. In v. 28 Paul simply declares that contrary to the persistent Jewish hardness and unbelief, the Gentiles “will listen.” Where Israel has steadfastly refused to believe the announcement of the gospel; the Gentiles will listen. How can Paul be so confident that these other humans, whom he knows to be hard-hearted sinners, like the Jews, will listen? He knows it because, as Luke says in Acts 13:48, “...as many as were appointed to eternal life believed.” God determined before the creation of the world to bring certain Gentiles into his kingdom and so Paul knows that as he announces that gospel to the Gentiles all those whom God has appointed to eternal life will believe the gospel, they will listen because God’s Holy Spirit will give them new hearts that want to believe.

A second way that God’s sovereign grace is emphasized in the concluding sentences of Acts is this description of Paul, chained to a Roman soldier day and night, living for two years in Rome but never lacking an audience and able to boldly and without hindrance preach the gospel of Jesus. As he says in 2 Timothy 2:9 that though he is bound with chains as a criminal “the word of God is not bound.” God has determined to save people from every tribe and tongue and language and nation and nothing and no one can hinder him from accomplishing his goal. He is going to do it through the preaching of Jesus as revealed on the pages of the Bible and so that word of God is going to run throughout the world, unhindered by human opposition and will save every one of God’s lost sheep. All who are appointed to eternal life will believe and so be saved as the gospel is preached by the church throughout the world.

Thus we should confidently preach the gospel to all who will listen and we should confidently send forth some of our members to go to those places where Christ is not yet known because God intends to save people from every corner of this world. Each one of us should be praying for and supporting with our efforts and our money the many missionaries we support as they preach this gospel to Gentiles across the face of this earth because you can be sure that by God’s sovereign grace “they will listen.” Every parent in here should faithfully teach this gospel to their children because God has promised that “they will listen.” We do not know whom God has appointed to eternal life. We only know that the means God has appointed for finding all those whom he has appointed is the clear and confident proclamation of this message about Jesus to all who will listen because you can be sure that some of those who hear will truly listen with faith.