

Unhindered

Acts: More than a Movement, Part 2

Acts 28:17-31

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I want to begin this morning by reading our passage together. For the last nine chapters in Acts we've been waiting for Paul to get to Rome. To go before Caesar. Last week we read about Paul's shipwreck and final arrival in Rome. And now we find out what happens once he gets there. This is our last section in the book of Acts.

Acts 28:17-31¹

¹⁷After three days he called together the local leaders of the Jews, and when they had gathered, he said to them, "Brothers, 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. ¹⁸When they had examined me, they wished to set me at liberty, because there was no reason for the death penalty in my case. ¹⁹But because the Jews objected, I was compelled to appeal to Caesar--though I had no charge to bring against my nation. ²⁰For 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." ²¹And they said to him, "We have received no letters from Judea about you, and none of the brothers coming here has reported or spoken any evil about you. ²²But we desire to hear from you what your views are, for with regard to this sect we know that everywhere it is spoken against."

²³When 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. ²⁴And some were convinced by what he said, but others disbelieved. ²⁵And disagreeing among themselves, they departed after Paul had made one statement: "The Holy Spirit was right in saying to your fathers through Isaiah the prophet:

²⁶"Go to this people, and say,
"You will indeed hear but never understand,
and you will indeed see but never perceive."

²⁷For 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.'

²⁸Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen."

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

This is the Word of the Lord.

¹ Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

Have you ever come to the end of a movie or book expecting another scene or page, but left with nothing? An unfinished or unsatisfying ending?

One of those for me is the 2010 movie *Inception*. Leonardo DiCaprio is the title character who plants ideas in people's minds by entering into their dreams. Of course, the danger is knowing the difference between dreaming and reality. But for this he has a trick. A spinning top. When he spins the top and it falls, he knows he's in the real world. If it keeps spinning he's still dreaming. Well at the end, (and this came out in 2010 so if I ruin the ending, that's on you), Leo is happily reunited with his family after a long time away. It seems too good to be true. He spins the top on the kitchen table and then mid spin...the movie ends.

So, is he dreaming? Is it real? I just want to know what's next. An unresolved ending is infuriating. And if I can be honest, reading the end of Acts sort of feels like that.

The book of Acts is one of the three longest New Testament books. We've spent twenty-five Sundays walking alongside these first disciples. We've invested time and thought journeying with them and we want to know what happens to Paul.

But just like a terrible documentary film, the screen goes black and all we get is: "He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance." The end.

What happens after that? What about Caesar? Will Paul be found innocent? What's going on with the Christians in Rome?

As our passage today opens up it seems like Luke is getting ready to start a whole new section. We've made it to Rome. Let's see what happens to Paul now. Why did Luke not continue the story? Did he just get tired of writing? Did he have writers block? I don't think so. Luke brilliantly ends the book of Acts on purpose. And what seems like an unsatisfying ending turns out to be satisfyingly on purpose.

To get this we have to consider the whole book, which is really part two. Acts is a sequel to the gospel book of Luke.

Listen to what Luke writes in Acts chapter one verse one: "In the first book" (that is the gospel of Luke), "O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach." Book one is about all that Jesus began to do and teach. It centers on the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The one who was God in the flesh. The one who came for our salvation. Who suffered the cross—the judgment of God in our place—that we might know life eternal. The climactic point of all of history. This is book one.

Book two then is all about what Jesus continues to do and teach through the Holy Spirit, apostles, disciples—through his church.

The end of Acts concludes these two dynamic stories of our history. And here's what we notice...it's not a story about Peter, Paul, or James, it's a story about Jesus. So whatever happens when Paul meets Caesar is inconsequential. We know it will happen, and we've seen throughout Acts that no matter what happens the movement of Jesus continues.

So here's the point in Luke's unfinished ending. I didn't see it until a friend showed me. The point is Jesus isn't done. The story isn't over. The movement continues. As simple as it might sound, it's one of the most important messages we could hear this morning. Jesus isn't done.

Reading Acts can feel like a distant and finished story. But the end of Acts isn't the end of our story, rather a beginning. Jesus isn't done. The movement of Jesus continues with me and with you. The ending of Acts is an invitation for us to walk in the light of Acts. To participate in the movement of Jesus. It's not that we're the next chapter in Acts, but rather Acts gives us an orientation for walking in this movement of Jesus. An orientation is a shaping in the right direction. To turn and direct. For us it means to direct a certain people in a certain way.

So here in the last passage of Acts we find that we are oriented *toward* something, *with* something, and *for* something. Toward, with, and for.

ORIENTED TOWARD THE KINGDOM AND ITS KING

First, we are oriented toward something. Look with me at verse 17. Three days after Paul arrives in Rome he gathers the leaders of the Jews in the city. Notice how Paul doesn't wait to see if he might go unnoticed or ignored, rather he decides to address any potential conflict right away.

And we hear a similar defense that we've heard all along. Paul had done nothing to the Jewish people. The Romans had nothing against him. It was because of the Jews' objection that he was compelled to appeal to Caesar. Paul wants them to know that he is a loyal Jew. Always has been. Always will be.

Turns out they've not heard about Paul, but they have heard of this movement, and heard negative things about it (verse 22). So in verse 23 they come back to his house on a specific day in greater numbers to hear about this movement.

From morning until evening (like if this church service lasted all day). Paul expounds, he explains, makes public these two things: testifying or witnessing to the kingdom of God, and persuading them about Jesus, as he looked to the Law and the Prophets.

Now, let's stop here. When Paul is given a day to talk about the hope he has, a day to talk about this movement that is turning the world upside down, it involves two main things: a kingdom and its King. In the midst of Rome, the greatest empire the world had ever known, Paul points them to the true kingdom and its King. We would do well to hear that today.

This is the orientation of Paul's heart, and it should be of ours as well—that we would be oriented toward the kingdom and its King. Oriented toward the kingdom and its King.

The author Luke bookends both the Gospel of Luke and Acts with the kingdom. In Luke 1, Jesus' foretold birth, the angel says: "He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end" (1:32–33). Then throughout Luke, Jesus goes around describing what the kingdom is like—it's of first importance. Jesus says, "Seek first the kingdom of God."

In Acts 1:3, the resurrected Jesus appeared and for forty days speaks about what? Speaks about the kingdom of God. "He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God." And then here at the end of Acts we are told twice about Paul's message of the kingdom and the King.

The story Luke is interested in telling is one about a kingdom and a King. It is a story that begins in creation and finds its central point in the life, death, burial, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. This

is the story Luke tells, and invites us to follow. And we follow by orienting ourselves toward the same story, the same hope. Toward the kingdom of God and it's King.

Many of us at First Free are familiar with Vaughn Roberts' definition—the kingdom of God is “God's people in God's place under God's rule and blessing.” The kingdom is where God gets done what he wants to get done. Where God's will is carried out. The place of Jesus' rule and reign as King. Because when Jesus came he ushered in, he inaugurated, the kingdom. Where the King is present, so is his kingdom.

So when Jesus came announcing the kingdom of God, he was introducing a reality that was meant to be an orientation for all we do in life.

To be clear, the kingdom is not yet fully realized. We wait for that day, we long for that day. When all sin, shame, sadness, and death will be no more. When everything will be put right. It's why Jesus teaches us to pray the way he does: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

The best way that we can orient ourselves toward the kingdom is simply to pray the Lord's prayer. To make that prayer the deepest longing of our heart. This prayer orients our hearts and our minds toward the kingdom.

Dr. Nicolas Perrin, the new President of Trinity (my seminary and the Free Church's seminary), has a wonderful book on the Kingdom of God, which I've benefited from a ton. In it he says it's not that the disciples or we ourselves create the kingdom here on earth. The kingdom isn't up to us, rather, Dr. Perrin says,

...following in the footsteps of Jesus, theirs (the disciples) was to live out the kingdom narrative in the present, ordering their lives in the present as an appropriate response to Jesus' signs, the events of Easter weekend and the future coming of the kingdom.

It's sort of like driving a car. If you keep your eyes fixed just feet in front of you, or locked on the center line, you are bound to have an accident, or at the very least, an uncomfortable and jerky ride. But if you keep your eyes fixed well enough ahead you'll drive more smoothly and safely.

That's sort of like the kingdom. The kingdom is ahead of us, but if we fix our eyes on it, then it will impact how we drive in the present. It's what we look forward to and long for, individually and as a church. As an embassy of the kingdom, we seek to order our lives under our King. For the kingdom hinges on the King, Jesus, the one who came and made a way for us to be citizens of the kingdom. Saving us from sin and death that we might know life everlasting, now and for eternity.

Are your hearts oriented toward the kingdom and its King? If we want to live out the story of Acts, we must have lives oriented toward the kingdom and it's King.

But the Jews were divided on this kingdom, and especially on this King, Jesus, which moves us into our second orientation, attentive hearts.

ORIENTED WITH ATTENTIVE HEARTS

The Jews were divided, and the Scriptures tell us that Paul then said the one statement that made everyone leave. You know how in marriage there are fighting rules. Written or unwritten. If you're married, you have fighting rules. You know the one thing you could say that would just end all discussion. Maybe like telling your wife she's just like her mother. It's over—conversation ender.

Well Paul says the one thing to end the conversation. Look at verse 25. He says, “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.””

Along with Acts, every gospel writer quotes this passage from Isaiah 6:9-10. It is key to this passage and to orienting us as we continue the drama of Acts in our lives. It has two purposes—explanation and examination.

Explanation

On the one hand, this quote answers the question, why didn’t they get it. Why didn’t they understand? It’s a question we ask of the characters in Acts, but also the characters in our own lives.

Here we find that it’s not something that surprises God. There was never the expectation that everyone would be able to see what was going on, because in fact people have become blind and deaf to what God is doing. They have eyes, but they aren’t attentive to what God is doing.

So the gospel is going to the Gentiles, those whose hearts and minds are ready to receive. And this full quote is placed at the end of Acts to help us see all of Acts through its lens. Throughout every stage in the book of Acts some believed and some didn’t. This wasn’t unforeseen by God, but rather always part of the journey. So, it shouldn’t catch us off guard that some won’t believe.

Examination

But in addition to an explanation, for us readers it calls for an examination of ourselves. Like an eye exam. Luke asks us, are you seeing rightly? Hearing rightly? Do you understand what you’ve read? Are you paying attention to the kingdom and the King? He is asking us if we are oriented with attentive hearts? Or if we’ve been blinded? Because if we want to continue the story of Acts we must be oriented with attentive hearts.

Isaiah 6:9-10, can be a confusing passage, but the Psalms, particularly 115 and 135 help explain what’s going on. Look with me at Psalm 135:15-18.

Psalm 135:15–18

¹⁵*The idols of the nations are silver and gold,
the work of human hands.*

¹⁶*They have mouths, but do not speak;
they have eyes, but do not see;*

¹⁷*they have ears, but do not hear,
nor is there any breath in their mouths.*

¹⁸*Those who make them become like them,
so do all who trust in them.*

The Psalms link blindness or inattentiveness with idolatry. For people to have eyes but not see means they’ve given their worship, their attention, to idols and so have become like them. Not being able to notice what God is doing. You can see now why the Jews left after Paul said those words. He essentially said they didn’t understand because they were idol worshipers.

Now I wanted to try and encapsulate what it means to have eyes but not see in our day. So I took this picture. *[Picture: Dad looking at phone instead of child.]* Or have ears but not hear. *[Picture: Dad talking on phone instead of listening to child.]* I know those are staged pictures, but it's seriously difficult to look at them. Our attention is shaped by the things around us.

This passage asks us to examine whether or not we are attentive to the kingdom of God and it's King, or if our attention has been hijacked and drawn away.

Here's the thing to grasp: Our problem with attention isn't just that we don't want to be attentive, but we are increasingly incapable. Even if we want to get better, our choices every day are making it worse and we don't even recognize it!

That's why I highlight the phone picture. I'm not a luddite, I love technology. But if we're not careful and mindful, it will shape our ability and capacity to be attentive to God.

Of course, phones aren't the only things that keep us from seeking first the kingdom of God. In Luke Jesus mentions the worries of this world that can shift our attention. Or our jobs can become the most important things and shape how we see the world. There are many barriers to attentiveness toward God. Inattentiveness is perhaps the greatest enemy to our spiritual life.

So, as people meant to continue the movement of God, we need to orient ourselves with attentive eyes toward what God is doing. Toward our King and his kingdom. Where have you spent your attention? Has your heart grown dull to the working of God?

How can we be more attentive? Here are a couple quick ideas. This week in your community groups take some time to discuss them and other ideas you have.

1. Put distraction in its place. Maybe it's a phone, maybe it's work, or worries, or whatever. Put them in their place. Set limits on screen time. Put your phone in a different room. Or maybe it just means not dwelling on your worries. This is something I have to tell myself. Because I am a worrier. I have to write my worries out—it often looks like a to-do list. Then it's not as scary, and it doesn't take up so much of my attention.

2. Be alone and be quiet. It's the spiritual discipline of solitude. It's like a detox from the cacophony of voices and information of our time. It's also really difficult. Who has the time to be alone? But it's essential to turning our attention toward God. It might look different for each of you. Maybe it means sitting in a room by yourself, maybe it's taking a walk, or washing dishes, or just a silent drive to work. In a noisy world we need the discipline of solitude.

3. Know what you're being attentive to. Paul's attention was focused on the kingdom of God and Jesus it's King. Paul was connecting the things God had done in the past, looking at Moses and the Prophets, with the things he had seen and heard in Jesus. The Old Testament was key to understanding who Jesus was. This sort of attentiveness requires attentiveness to the Scriptures, but specifically an attentiveness that connects the Scriptures in such a way that you can see the grand story that God is writing. We need to continue to have attentive eyes that see the richness of God's Word as one coherent narrative, and how that narrative continues to impact our world today.

ORIENTED FOR FAITHFUL PRESENCE

The last orientation we have is the image of Paul.

The final picture of Paul in Rome is... mundane. For someone who had such a dramatic life, this ending is simplistic, but also instructive for us who wish to carry on the movement of Jesus. Scholar Dean Pinter says:

The vision that Luke offers at the end of Acts is instructive for contemporary Christians. Often we are tempted by the power projections of this world: military might, wealth, triumphal architecture, symbols of cultural supremacy. We are easily awed by the metrics of worldly success and failure to notice God's victory on display in the lives of humble, obedient, and faithful servants and communities.

The last orientation we have is an orientation for faithful presence. If we wish to continue the story of Acts, we must be oriented for a life of faithful presence.

The last image we have of Paul is one we need today. It doesn't encompass everything about faithful presence, but it represents a humble starting place. The last picture we have of Paul is one of waiting, welcoming, and witnessing.

Waiting

The one who traversed the globe is now stuck at home under house arrest at his own expense. He likely took up tent making again to cover his expenses.

This image is instructive for us. You may be sitting here and you need to listen to the call to wait, or maybe you just feel you need permission to be able to wait. We live in an age of instantaneous results. An age of freedom and success. If you want something, you better go for it. Don't wait for it.

But you may not have a choice. It may seem like life has you in a prison. You don't feel like you're going forward, but just standing still. God may have you in a waiting period. But it's not a pointless time, rather a purposeful time. Wait well, looking for the opportunities and people God brings your way. Which leads to Paul's welcoming.

Welcoming

Last week Chris discussed at length the theme of hospitality and welcome. If you didn't hear it, please go back and listen. It is one of the most important patterns throughout the book of Luke and Acts. Hospitality is essential to Christian living. In part it's why we do community groups. A practice in hospitality.

The one additional thing I want to point out in this passage is the use of home in hospitality. Paul of course didn't have many choices, but his home was used for the work of ministry.

Christine Pohl in her wonderful book, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as Christian Tradition*, says, "Recovering hospitality will involve reclaiming the household as a key site for ministry and then reconnecting the household and the church, so that the two institutions can work in partnership for the sake of the world."

Of course, we live in an age of hostility and suspicion. So many things keep us from hospitality, but the practice of Christian hospitality is perhaps one of the most compelling images for a watching world. How can you use the space and resources God has given you to welcome one another?

Witnessing

Lastly, witnessing. You can see how everything leads up to this. The main activity. And here we see it is twofold: proclaiming or heralding the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ.

A faithful presence means we take any opportunity to orient others toward the King and his kingdom. Connecting what God has done, is doing, and will do among us one day. And then teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ. This is discipleship. Instructing others in the person and way of Jesus. We are called to teach others about the person of Jesus and the ways of Jesus.

Paul is not in the ideal location, you may not think you are either, but he's called to proclaim the kingdom and teach about the King wherever he is located. In what ways are you proclaiming the kingdom and teaching about the King?

Conclusion

Friends, Jesus isn't done. And Luke invites us to participate in the drama God has been carrying out.

As many of you know, I try to read through *The Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings* each summer. You might call it a spiritual discipline. Toward the end of *The Two Towers*, Frodo and Sam have this scene where they are reflecting on the great stories from the past. I'm sure you remember this part, it's where they are resting on the stairs of Cirith Ungol, weary and in terror, right before Shelob's lair. You know what I'm talking about.

Anyway, they begin reflecting on the great stories from the past. The great elves and men who accomplished great deeds in the past, and Sam begins to realize that the episodes of the past have brought them to this moment. Sam asks, "Don't the great tales ever end?" Frodo answers, "No, they never end as tales... But the people in them come, and go when their part's ended. Our part will end later. Or sooner."

The great stories never end. The same is true with the grand drama of God. From creation to today and beyond. Jesus isn't done. The movement isn't finished. Our parts will end later, or sooner. But what sort of story will they tell. Will our stories be ones oriented toward the King and kingdom, with attentive hearts focused on God, and for a life of faithful presence?

Look with me at the final word Luke gives us as we end this long book together. Here the ESV preserves the Greek word order. The last word of this two-part journey is the small description: "without hindrance." It is the only time this particular word is used in the New Testament.

Throughout Acts the church has been plagued with external and internal opposition. And yet the Word of God continues to grow and push forward. From imprisonment, embezzlement, betrayal, disunity, nefarious schemes, death threats, and riots—the Word of God progresses unhindered. The central proclamation about a King and kingdom advances. The central word of the cross, whereby sinners are forgiven continues to spread.

The word of God is not something that can be stamped out, contained, or hindered. Because Jesus isn't done. He invites us to continue the unhindered work of this movement.

Indeed, we may consider that the one word that describes this movement, the one word that goes with us, is the one word that ends our book and our series—"unhindered."