

Acts 28:17–28[29]

This Salvation of God

“And so we came to Rome” (28:14). His perilous journey at last ended, we stand with Paul in the capital city. But note where Paul goes first—not to see the grand sights of the imperial city, not to the gates of Caesar, nor even out to convert gentile Romans. “He called together the local leaders of the Jews,” (v. 17) and preached to them. As always, Paul goes first to the house of Israel. His sermon is a concise summary of his defense speeches in the past. It is a two-point sermon: (1) a concise defense of his actions in the past and (2) assertion that “I had done nothing against the people or the customs of our fathers” (v. 17). He stands now awaiting trial in Caesar’s court because of the actions of his own people (vv. 18–19). Like Jesus, his own people have delivered him into the hands of the Romans and, like Jesus, he brings no charges against his nation (v. 19). This statement does not exactly fit what we were told about Paul’s rescue by the Romans (21:31) but fits Luke’s purpose in this sermon—a defense summation by Paul before his own people, a defense made in part by showing how Paul’s trial parallels Jesus’ trial. The Lukan Paul stands before his own people in Rome, a man in chains, not because he sought to play havoc with the historic faith of Israel but rather because he sought to live out “the hope of Israel” (v. 20).

The reaction to Paul’s defense is threefold. *First*, the Roman Jews say that they have received no official directives about Paul but that they know this “sect” is “everywhere ... spoken against” (v. 22). Will they think for themselves or only await official guidance or judge by popular hearsay? *Second*, the requested follow-up meeting lasting from morning until evening consisted of Paul’s attempt to “convince them about Jesus both from the law of Moses and from the prophets” (v. 23). Paul takes a great amount of time to witness, and he witnesses on the basis of the tradition his hearers hold dear. *Third*, the reaction of his Jewish audience is typically divided. Some are convinced, others are not (v. 24). There is joy that some hear and receive the good news, but sadness that many do not. Isaiah 6:9–10 is used to explain their rejection. Some in Israel had always grown “heavy of hearing,” unable to “understand with their heart.” It had happened before, now it was happening again.

Behind this confrontation with Israel is the church’s attempt to explain to itself the

mystery of unbelief. Unbelief is always a mystery to those who believe. How can we explain that the truth which motivates us, which helps us to explain the world and to give meaning to our lives, does not move others? Why do some look at Christ and see the Light of the World and others see nothing? Eyes and ears see and hear differently. Rejection of our gospel is perceived as a threat. If the truth is so self-evident to us, why do not all believe? Rather than impute wickedness to the unbeliever, we must rejoice in those who do believe and allow the mystery to remain a mystery, hidden somehow in the inscrutable purposes of God. Like Paul, we must go to those who are able to listen (v. 30). The section ends with Paul saying that “this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen” (v. 29). As Luke sees it, gentiles listen, not because they are better people than the Jews but because they have absolutely no possibility of salvation outside of these promises. Luke told a story of a great banquet where the original recipients “all alike began to make excuses” (Luke 14:18). The rejected host then sent his messengers to “bring in the poor and maimed and blind and lame” (14:21). These outsiders come, not because they are especially perceptive but because they have nowhere else to go. Unless someone else’s invitation comes to them, they are without hope. The poor enter because in this kingdom populated by little ones only those who are poor, hungry, weeping, and reviled are empty enough to hear and accept the invitation that is offered. The gentiles respond because they have no other hope than that offered in fulfillment of the promises to Israel.

Paul’s declaration that he will now go to the gentiles does not mean that God has at last forsaken the promises to Israel. From the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, he encountered a divided Israel. That many in Israel still reject the message about Jesus does not negate their status as the chief beneficiaries of that message. The mission to Israel continues throughout Acts—Paul goes first to the Jews in Rome—and we could easily expect it to continue in the church of Theophilus. There is no indication that the promises of God to Israel, the promises in which Luke places such great meaning, have come to an end simply because of the rejection by most of the recipients of those promises. The God of Luke–Acts is a resourceful, persistent God who does not give up easily. The words from Isaiah quoted by Paul do not in their original context signal the end of God’s work with intransigent Israel but its beginning. The mission to Israel was not a complete failure (21:20). Luke would not, as the church did later, have transferred the guilt

of one generation's rejection to another. The Jews who rejected the gospel do not necessitate the end of appeals to them anymore than Pilate's actions lead to the discontinuance of the mission to the gentiles. Luke would not have advocated, as did some later Christian commentators, a new gentile particularism denying God's universal love for the Jew (see *Reflection: Luke and His Fellow Jews*). Among both Jew and gentile, the verdict upon the gospel is mixed. Therefore, Paul welcomed "all who came to him" (v. 30).

Preaching and Teaching Unhindered

ACTS 28:30–31

Perhaps Paul welcomed all who came to him at his lodgings (28:30) because members of the Way had been excluded from the synagogues (cf. 28:22). No impediment will silence Paul as long as he has breath from "preaching the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ" (28:31). In fact the last verse of Acts could be taken as a summary of the whole book. The Spirit that descended at Pentecost gave the young church its tongue to tell "the mighty works of God" (2:11). We have observed the church proclaiming those mighty works despite every hindrance and every obstacle. Bold proclamation to all who will listen is a mighty work of God.

Acts 20:25, 38 suggests that Luke knew full well the result of Paul's trial. Theophilus and his church also must have known that Paul finally died a martyr's death at Rome. Earlier we noted the parallels between the final trial and suffering of Paul and the passion of Jesus as recorded in Luke's Gospel. Why did Luke not also develop an account of the death of Paul to parallel the death of Jesus?

We can only speculate on why Luke chose to end Acts as he did. We know enough of his dramatic genius to be assured that his ending was not accidental. The Book of Acts began with Luke telling Theophilus that his second volume would be a continuation of "all that Jesus began to do and teach until the day when he was taken up" (1:1–2). The words and deeds of Christ continue in the work and proclamation of his disciples. They could not silence Jesus, because the Holy Spirit empowered Jesus' people to continue to speak of the coming kingdom of God. In Acts we have witnessed how that bold proclamation reached out to include all people (4:29; 28:31), anyone who would listen. Caesar

cannot silence the gospel. The proclamation was not stilled at Calvary, not ended when Stephen was stoned, nor can the story end with the death of Paul in Rome. Paul has been delivered from the forces of nature (27:1–28:16). He has been pronounced innocent by the Roman courts. He has thus triumphed over the most dreaded powers. What can stop his witness? The risen Christ told his disciples, “You are witnesses of these things” (Luke 24:48), implying that the story had begun rather than ended. Acts is the continuation of that story of witness into “Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

While in no way denying the real challenges the gospel must overcome, as well as the real suffering believers must endure, Acts is determined to encourage Theophilus by telling the positive story of the forward advance of God’s truth. Three thousand were baptized at Pentecost. By chapter 21 the Jerusalem elders can report that tens of thousands of Jews now believe in Jesus (21:20). Philip out-performed Simon Magus (8:9–13); Paul outdid Elymas the magician (13:6–12). The stories of success—stories a persecuted, despondent church needs to hear—abound in Acts.

Though this world is often an inhospitable place for the gospel and its witnesses, real conversion is possible. Disciples are to be in the world, witnessing to a power unknown to the world. A simplistic division of the world into the children of light and the children of darkness is not found in Luke-Acts. Surprising converts are made. No one is without hope. Paul, who now bears the gospel to Rome, was once a dreaded enemy of God. The Ethiopian was an outsider. Cornelius was a foreigner. With the Spirit active, who can defeat this gospel? In the words of Gamaliel, a member of the high court who sought to silence these witnesses, “keep away from these men and let them alone; for if this plan or this undertaking is of men, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them” (5:38–39). The future belongs to the Way.

To call Luke-Acts “triumphalistic,” as some have done (D. L. Tiede, pp. 139–140), is to ignore Luke’s intended audience—a persecuted minority fighting for its life. The basic optimism of Acts sometimes has been used by succeeding generations of Christians in a triumphalist fashion, but that is not Luke’s problem. Luke’s problem is Theophilus and his church—a tiny band of disheartened believers who are in danger of losing hope. A smug, self-satisfied, culturally significant church cannot easily understand Acts.

As the contemporary American church finds itself pushed to the periphery of the

dominant culture, severed from its former props and social crutches, the encouraging words of Acts may take on a relevance unknown to Christians in our more “successful” days. A “triumphalist” gospel is a dangerous temptation for a “successful” church but an appropriate source of encouragement for the Lord’s persecuted and oppressed.

You and I live in the continuation of the story of Acts. Acts must close in an open-ended fashion, with the door still open for work and witness rather than closed by death, because the Spirit is still active. Luke is not simply writing history. He writes the story of the Spirit, the Spirit incarnate in people like you and me. Theophilus’ church asked, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” (1:6). When will the story end and all the promises be fulfilled, when shall we receive the benefactions of God in their fullness, when will the power we glimpse in the miracles of the disciples be present forever (28:30)? Luke gives no answer except that the story continues. Living here between the times, as we always have, there is work for the church to do. We need not be gazing into heaven (1:11) when the Spirit is active here on earth. The period of the world mission of the church is now. There is still time to tell what has happened on earth. We need not cower from confrontation with the future, fearful of some cataclysmic nuclear end. There may be tribulation, and some of it may be at the hands of our own technology gone mad. Yet there has always been tribulation for disciples—even in times when the rest of the world felt quite peaceful and secure. Our security as believers lies, as it always has, not in the fulfillment of optimistic hopes for human progress, in either technology or super-power arms control. Our hope lies in the hands of a loving and powerful God. This knowledge enables us to speak, even when nuclear paralysis or fear of the future makes many stand in helpless silence. Since Pentecost nothing has been able to silence the tongues of God’s faithful witnesses. In your church and mine the story continues.

The mandate of [Luke 24:47](#) and [Acts 1:8](#) is still in force for contemporary witnesses who must continue to be faithful and to proclaim the gospel “unhindered” (28:31). Even bound in Caesar’s chains, Paul continued to witness unhindered. Even when Paul is murdered by the state, the gospel continued unhindered in Theophilus’ church. Now, nearly two millennia after Luke wrote to Theophilus, Acts reminds us that despite rejection, persecutions, setbacks, and our own lethargy or cowardice the gospel proclamation continues to the very end of the earth, by God’s grace, unhindered.