

Unstoppable

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[0 : 0 0] groups. Okay, let's turn to our Bibles and we are back in the book of Acts. We've been on and off through the book of Acts for actually for several years with Paul. You're telling me he started his study on Acts back in 2017. Goodness me. But we had the last trance just a couple of months ago and we've reached the very last chapter. And so we're going to read this evening from chapter 24 beginning at verse 14 right through to the end of the chapter.

And if you remember some weeks back when we got to here, you will recall that Paul has been on this long and difficult journey taking him to Rome and involved a shipwreck on the way, all kinds of dramas. And we finished up last time at the end of chapter 28 verse 14 where it says, and so we came to Rome, ending that long and purposeful journey that God told Paul he was going to have to take. So here we are in Rome, verse 15. And the brothers there, when they heard about us, they came as far as the Forum of Appius and the three taverns to meet us. On seeing them, Paul thanked God and took courage. And when we came into Rome, Paul was allowed to stay by himself with the soldiers that guarded him. After three days, he called together the local leaders of the Jews.

And when they 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.

When they'd examined me, they wished to set me at liberty because there was no reason for the death penalty in my case. But because the Jews objected, I was compelled to appeal to Caesar, though I had no charge to bring against my nation. For this reason, therefore, I've asked to see you and to speak with you, since it is because of the hope of Israel that I am wearing this chain. And he said to him, we've received no letters from Judea about you, and none of the brothers coming here has reported or spoken any evil about you. But we desire to hear from you what your views are. With regard to this sect, we know that everywhere it is spoken against. When they'd appointed a day for him, they came to him at his lodging in greater numbers. From morning till evening, he expanded 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 some were convinced by what he said. But others disbelieved. And 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, go to this people and say, you will indeed hear but never understand. You will indeed see but never perceive.

[3 : 2 6] For this people's heart has grown dull. With their ears they can barely hear. With their eyes they've 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 and they will listen. 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. Amen. And may God bless to us his word.

Well, good evening everyone. It would be a great help to have that passage from the end of Acts open in front of you. So please do turn there in your Bibles, Acts 28, and looking at these last couple of paragraphs.

Now, I wonder what you think makes for a good ending. I wonder what you thought of the conclusion of the book of Acts, of Luke, the writer, his ending. I don't know about you, but I enjoy loose ends being tied up, all the plot lines drawn to a nice, neat conclusion, and no unanswered questions. Nothing more frustrating than a book that doesn't answer all the questions or a film that leaves things hanging in the air. Now, Luke has been building to this ultimate conclusion, and at first glance, it perhaps seems like a massive anticlimax. The writer of this book that we hold in our hands, he is a key figure. You see, Luke's accounts, both his gospel, but also the follow-on, the book of Acts, is a dominating factor of the New Testament. In my Bible, it occupies about 62 pages.

It's about a quarter of the New Testament. This is a big, chunky document. And you perhaps expect, at the end of that, a nice, neat conclusion, but it feels like he's left things hanging with questions unanswered.

And many of our questions are left unanswered, unresolved. What happens to Paul? How did his appeal to Caesar? Remember, the previous six or seven chapters are building up to this appeal before Caesar. What happens? How did it go? We don't know. What were the circumstances surrounding Paul's death?

[6 : 12] But you see, our questions and the answers that we want are not the questions that Luke is answering. His is not a book primarily about Paul or about Peter or about any other human character.

Rather, it's a book about the Lord Jesus Christ, the God-man. And it's about what he began to do, his life, his death, his resurrection, recorded in Luke's gospel. And then it's what he continued to do, the risen and ascended Lord Jesus. That's what the book of Acts is all about, is what Jesus continue to do. So it's not primarily a book about human activity, but rather it's about the activity of the risen and ascended Lord Jesus at work by his spirit. And of course, he's at work through real people in history, people like Paul and like Peter. And that's why this whole series we've been looking out over these past four or five years has the subtitle, the continuing acts of the ascended Lord Jesus. Not the acts of the apostles. Primarily, it's the acts of the ascended Lord Jesus.

And so for Luke to leave certain matters for Paul unresolved and unrecorded is unproblematic because his purpose was not to write a biography about Paul. That is not what he set out to do.

His purpose was to give Christians then and today certainty about the ongoing work of the Lord Jesus. And given that that is his purpose, set out in the first verse of his gospel account, given that's his purpose, his conclusion is, rather than being some sort of anti-climax, his conclusion is absolutely in line with his purpose. Luke is showing us so clearly that Jesus is keeping his word. He is keeping his promises. His message, his gospel message is going just as he promised to the very ends of the earth. And there's nothing, absolutely nothing in this world that can stop that from happening. That's the point. That's the message Luke is leaving us with.

Nothing can stop the progress of his gospel. And the final sentence, just flick over to that, is absolutely key to summarizing the whole message. Paul lived there in Rome 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 proclamation of the gospel against all the odds.

[9 : 00] Just reread those previous chapters. Trial after trial, ship break, snake bites, all of that. Nothing is going to stop the gospel advancing. And against all the odds, Paul has made it to Rome. Here he is at the very epicenter of the known ancient world, in the very center of political and economic power.

And there he is proclaiming the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. And so Luke, by concluding in this way, he wants all of us to come away from this chapter, from the whole book, to come away clear and certain and confident in the unstoppable progress of the gospel.

Well, that is why the book of Acts is here for us tonight. To give us great confidence in the progress, the unstoppable progress of the gospel to the very ends of the earth. That's the general picture. Let's look a bit more detail, shall we? Firstly, verses 14 to 16.

It's Paul getting to Rome. It's our first point. Getting to Rome. We see the promises God always keeps and the real encouragement fellow Christians bring. Now, these few verses there, verses 14 to 16, are a massive encouragement for two reasons. First, Paul actually makes it to Rome.

That is significant. From a human perspective, that seemed like a fairly unlikely prospect at many points. As you reread those previous chapters where Paul's in prison, under guard, before various judges, that shipwreck, Paul is not a free man. He cannot just decide to get up and go to Rome. That was not within his gift. He eventually appeals to Caesar through all those legal proceedings, and he begins that journey to Rome. It's the most terrifying of sea journeys. Just reread chapter 27. He's shipwrecked, bitten by the snake, and yet, at the end of verse 14 there in chapter 28, he is able to write, and so we came to Rome. That has been Paul's goal for so long. The final third of the book of Acts is all about that journey, getting to Rome. Right the way back in chapter 19, you see Paul setting his sights on getting to this great city. Obstacle after obstacle has stood in his way, trial after trial, years in prison. He's faced down very real threats to his life. At many points, I'm sure Paul thought this must be it. And yet, through all of those trials, the Lord has kept and guarded him.

[11 : 55] Just look back with me just to chapter 23 and to verse 11. This is the great promise that the Lord made to Paul at one of his lowest points. Paul has just appeared before the Jerusalem council.

And look at verse 11 there of chapter 23. The following night, the Lord stood by Paul and said, Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome. There's that great promise to the Lord himself made to Paul all the way back there when he's still in Jerusalem. You will make it to Rome. And here he is at last, in the very epicenter of the most powerful empire in the world, due to appear before Caesar himself.

And Luke is showing us that nothing is going to stop the spread of gospel witness. Nothing is going to stop the gospel going to the very end of the earth. And now that real gospel witness will take place with God's messenger there in Rome, truly, the gospel will speed along those famous roads of the Roman Empire, the very tributaries of empire all the way through the known world. The gospel would go from there and spread and spread and spread and spread as we know today. We're here because that was the reality.

God's gospel is absolutely unstoppable. Human opposition cannot stop it. Not even the elements, not even storms, not even the natural world, even snakes, can stop the march of gospel witness to the ends of the earth. And that must encourage us. If you read through Acts, it seems so unlikely from a human perspective. You just think this is never going to happen. Paul's never going to get there.

And that must encourage us. We are going to encounter struggles as we carry on that work. Acts teaches us to expect that, doesn't it? There will be human opposition. There will be all sorts of things to stop the progress of the gospel. But even when we do face those difficulties and uncertainties and challenges, great perplexity perhaps, we can know with absolute certainty that nothing is going to stand in the way of gospel progress. In the world you shall have tribulation, said Jesus to his disciples. But he went on, be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world.

[14 : 39] And in the face of much tribulation, Paul makes it to Rome. That's the first encouragement here. Jesus keeps his promises. He can be trusted. Second, second encouragement in these couple of verses is this.

It's the very real and personal encouragement of the Christian brothers who greeted Paul. Look at verse 15. The brothers there, that is the brothers in Rome, when they heard about us, so at this point Luke is with Paul, they're on the way to Rome.

When they heard about us, they came as far as the Forum of Appius and three taverns to greet us. On seeing them, Paul thanked God and took courage.

Now, I'll forgive your geography of ancient Rome, but these two places mentioned here are quite a way out of the actual city of Rome. They didn't just pop down the road to see Paul. The Forum of Appius is about 65 kilometers south of the city, and the three taverns about 50 kilometers away.

So that's quite a journey. That's a good day or two's walking, isn't it? And presumably, they'd heard that Paul was on the way, and they came to meet him on his way into Rome, and they accompanied him on his final leg into the city.

[15 : 58] And just that simple thing would have been such an encouragement to Paul, wouldn't it? Such a kindness from the Lord to send these people out to him. For Paul, this had been the long-term goal.

It had cost him so much to get to this point, and to be welcomed by Christian brothers on the way in, very likely folk who had received and read over his letter, the book of Romans, which we have in our Bibles.

They would have received this a few years before, perhaps, and read it. And here they are, come out to greet Paul on his way in. What a massive encouragement that would have been to him. Just think of the joy you experience of being reunited with family after a long journey.

Perhaps after COVID. Seeing my kids play with their cousins after over a year. The joy of seeing that reunion. And the joy of Christian fellowship after a long journey.

After a treacherous journey. How much encouragement that would have been for Paul. After all the hardship, the near death, and the voyage to see these brothers. Not only had he reached Rome, but he was greeted there by the living fruit of the gospel.

[17 : 16] Possibly his own labors and ministry had led to these dear folk becoming Christians. And here he is, in front of his eyes. Christians greeting him on his way in. People willing to walk 65 kilometers out to see him, and then walk another 65 back to Rome.

I wonder how far we would walk to greet gospel partners returning from mission. Hopefully we would get in the car and drive to Glasgow airport, perhaps. But how far would you go?

And you see, that effort communicates real love and affection for Paul, doesn't it? A very real evidence of partnership in the gospel. And it's quite right that Paul should thank God, as he does there in verse 16, and take courage.

The Lord was very clearly already at work in Rome, ahead of him. The place he longed to go to. Here he is with people from that very city, already professing faith and encouraging him.

And what a courage that would have been to him for all the work that would lay ahead for him. And in recording this for us, Luke is showing us what sort of God that we have, what kind of Savior we have.

[18 : 28] He does keep his promises, yes. But he also brings real encouragement to us through one another. Through real flesh and blood, he is able to bring real encouragement to us.

And through our own flesh and blood presence, we can give real courage to one another, can't we? Our gatherings together each Sunday, in smaller groups through the week.

Perhaps intimate gatherings in our homes. That flesh and blood fellowship is so crucial, isn't it? All of these things are so important.

Don't undervalue them. The great courage you can bring to a brother or sister just by being with them. The great courage Paul took here just by being with these other Christians. Never underestimate the power and the significance of being together, of seeing each other eye to eye, and bringing real courage and fellowship to each other.

We need that, don't we? And Paul needed it. Even the great apostle Paul. He needed this encounter to give him courage for what would lie ahead. Well, that's the first thing we see as Paul gets to reign.

[19 : 38] Real encouragements and also the great promises of God who keeps his promises. But following that encouragement, there comes a sobering dose of reality.

Look on to verses 17 to 27. This is the gathering of the Jews. We see the sober reality of the hardened privileged. So Paul, after getting settled into his accommodation, after a few days, he seems to be under some sort of house arrest.

You see there in verse 16, he was able to stay by himself. But there's a soldier there guarding him. But he's got a lot of freedom to have people into his home, to entertain people, to meet with others.

And so once he's settled in, he summons the local Jewish leaders in verse 17. And there are two gatherings. The first in verses 17 to 22. And then a second from verse 23.

Now the first of these gatherings seems fairly unproblematic. He is able to share with them something of his own story, and especially the past few years of his life.

[20 : 42] Where he's been in prison, facing these different trials. He's explaining the background to all of that. And in the eyes of the Romans, he points out, he has no case to answer.

They can't find any fault with Paul. But it's actually the Jews who are pressing charge, wanting to see things not go well for Paul. It's the Jews who have opposed him. And that's why Paul calls together this gathering there in Rome.

He wants to explain himself and to build good relations there in the city. He wants to make a defense of his own existence and the very heart of his message. And notice verse 20 there.

He says, 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.

See, Paul's explaining the very fundamental reason that he is in chains before them. And it's because of the hope of Israel, he says. This was the great messianic hope.

[21 : 46] The hope for the coming of the Messiah, for the establishment of the messianic age. When evil would be defeated. When justice would be secured. Peace forever could be enjoyed.

And in the Old Testament, this hope of restoration for God's people, this fulfillment of all God's promises, is presented as nothing less than a resurrection from the dead.

And this is what the people of Israel were waiting for. This was their great hope. And Paul was saying, It's now come. That is why I'm here before you. And what was promised and anticipated there in the Old Testament?

It was a resurrection that was bodily. Isaiah 26 reads like this. Your dead shall live. Their bodies shall rise.

You who dwelt in the dust, awake and sing for joy. It was a physical resurrection they were hoping for. And it's a resurrection that is bodily.

[22 : 55] That is clearly God's doing. And that it will happen with the dawning of a new age. With the inauguration of the fulfillment of all God's promises. That's what they were waiting for.

And this is just what Luke records. Jesus teaching his disciples at the end of his gospel. Here's what Jesus said. He said, These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you.

That everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled. And then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures.

And he said to them, Thus it is written that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead and the repentance of the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in all nations.

Beginning from Jerusalem. See, Jesus explained to them that the very heart of what they were waiting for. The great Jewish hope.

[23 : 53] The day had come. The resurrection is the very heart of the hope of Israel. It's the hope of the scriptures. And with the resurrection of Jesus, we see the beginning and the fulfillment of all those wonderful promises in the scriptures.

It is this hope that Paul claims to have now been fulfilled and made available through the resurrection of Jesus. It is because of this hope, Paul says, that I'm in chains.

It is because of the hope of Israel. That great day of resurrection, which has now come, he says. That's why I'm in chains. Well, this certainly interests those Jewish leaders who are gathered with him.

And in verse 22, they say that they want to hear more from Paul. All they've heard about this sect, as they call it, is negative, verse 22. So they want to hear more. What is really at the root of what Paul is saying here?

And so it's this second meeting, recorded from verse 23, that things become explosive. And it's here that the hearts of the Jews in Rome are really exposed. It's here that the sober reality of the hardened privileged is seen for what it really is.

[25 : 14] In the second gathering there from verse 23, Paul does what he's done everywhere he's gone. It's the same thing, wherever he is, he opens the scriptures and shows them how Jesus is the fulfillment of those great hopes.

How in his death and resurrection, he has fulfilled all that was promised. So he goes through the law of Moses, the prophets, opening up to them how Jesus is the fulfillment of all those promises.

And he's appealing to these Jewish leaders, men who knew inside out the promises of the scriptures.

And Paul is telling them that it's happened. All that you've longed for is now fulfilled. The long promised Messiah has come. He's risen from the dead.

This is explosive news. This is unbelievably significant. And look how they respond.

[26 : 15] Verse 24. Some were convinced by what he said, but others disbelieved. So Paul has proclaimed the same message he's done everywhere else he's gone.

There's nothing new he's saying here. But as with everywhere else, the responses he gets are the same. Some believe, others reject.

Paul's great goal, first articulated in chapter 19, to get to Rome, that would not prove to be some sort of evangelistic utopia where everyone would believe and repent.

That is not how it was going to be. Rome would be very much like everywhere else. Some would repent and believe, but others would reject.

And by including this sobering reality in this penultimate paragraph, Luke is reminding us of the reality of gospel witness. The fundamentals are unchanging.

[27 : 24] The message remains the same. The responses are the same. There are only two, as we've seen time and time again through the book of Acts. Belief or rejection.

Acceptance or unbelief. And Luke is saying we'll always get both. Wherever you go. That is how it was for Jesus himself.

That's how it was for Peter, for Paul. And for every believer, every Christian down through the ages. And will remain so for us. No surprise there.

Same message. The same responses. And we, like Paul, in many ways, we minister to a hardened privilege.

For Paul, it was those with the great privilege of being the old covenant people of God, the Jews. They had known for centuries, more than any other people group, the word of God.

[28 : 24] Great, great promises were made to them. And they, more than anyone else, should have responded with joy and glad acceptance at Paul's testimony here.

The one they've been waiting for. The great Messiah had come. But it was not so. Many rejected. A hardened privilege.

And for us, we live in a society that for many centuries has known the blessing of being taught the word of God. Of having it shape how we live.

Shaping the common values that we share. We have a rich, rich heritage. To live in a Western country is to live in a society still utterly saturated by Christian concepts and assumptions.

That's just the way it is in our world. A great privileged heritage from Christian fundamentals. And yet, as we all know through our own experience, that heritage has led to a real hardening.

[29 : 34] And that is a sober reality. But Luke is equipping us to expect us. To be prepared for us. To fall on our knees in prayer. For those around us in the city who are hardened.

But we're not to be without hope. It may be that we minister to a hardened privilege in our Western society. But we're not without hope. Because there are those who will receive the message of joy.

And this is the note that Luke concludes on. Verses 28 to 31. We've seen the gathering of the Jews. But here we have gospeling the Gentiles.

We see the unstoppable progress of the gospel to the ends of the earth. That is Luke's concluding note in his account here. And Paul's concluding words to the Jewish leaders would have struck them like a hammer.

Look at verse 28. Having quoted from Isaiah. He says, Therefore, let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles.

[30 : 41] They will listen. You see, Jesus was not to be only the savior of the Jewish people. But rather he was the savior of the world.

The ends of the earth was in view from the beginning. It's clear even from Luke's account. Right the way back in Luke's gospel chapter 2. We meet Simeon. There in the temple in Jerusalem.

Waiting for the promised one. And here's what he says when he meets Jesus, the child. He says, My eyes have seen your salvation.

That you have prepared in the presence of all peoples a light for revelation to the Gentiles. And for glory to your people Israel. Simeon knew, didn't he, that the coming of Jesus into the world was not just good news for the people of Israel.

But rather for the whole world. A light of revelation to the Gentiles. You see, the God of the Bible is not just the God of a small slice of our world.

[31 : 48] A particular people group. No. He is the God of the whole earth. And so God's salvation. His gospel is for the whole world. That's always been the case.

And Jesus himself is explicit, isn't he? In the opening words of Acts, his commands to his followers is that they would be his witnesses. Not only in Israel. Not only in Jerusalem.

But beyond. Into Samaria. And to the very ends of the earth. Chapter 1 of Acts, verse 8. And that is just what we see unfolded before us.

In Acts. For a book that covers 30 years or so. It's a pretty brief account. But 30 years was all it took for the gospel to spread from Jerusalem to Rome.

It renewed the face of the ancient worlds. It turned the world upside down. And in the intervening millennia. That gospel has continued to go and go to the ends of the earth.

[32 : 53] Unstoppably. Across the planet. We would not be here otherwise. If the gospel had not gone with all boldness and without hindrance, we wouldn't be here.

And that is why this ending is just so fitting and appropriate for Luke's purposes. It is a gospel for all nations. Verse 28.

And it's a message that cannot be stopped. Verses 30 and 31. And we leave the account of Acts. We leave the apostle Paul in the midst of ongoing ministry.

The same work that he's been committed to all the way through. Namely proclaiming and teaching the word of God about Jesus Christ. And that work continues with all boldness and without hindrance.

As one writer concludes, with that, Luke closes his history. It was never meant to be a complete record of the rise and progress of Christianity.

[33 : 57] But it was meant to be a representative account of what Christianity was. And what it, or rather the risen Lord Jesus, began and continued to do. But at the point where Luke laid down his pen, Paul and the gospel of God's kingly rule were irrepressibly surging ahead.

Without let up or hindrance. In spite of human opposition or nature's storms. Irrepressibly surging ahead. That's how Luke leaves it.

Going on without hindrance. Paul may be under guard here. In chains. But the gospel isn't. How could it be? The gospel is the message of forgiveness of sins.

And the gift of eternal life from the sovereign Lord of the universe. It cannot be stopped or contained. How could it? The gospel cannot be chained up or locked down. The gospel will come under threat.

God's people will suffer. But the gospel itself will never be silenced. It will continue to grow and go to the ends of the earth until Christ returns.

[35 : 04] Jesus is the king of the universe. Jesus is the king of the universe. And he will be glorified today and tomorrow as men and women, boys and girls all across the globe turn to him in repentance and faith.

Jesus is the king of the universe. Jesus is the king of the universe. And he will be glorified today and tomorrow. And his church will continue to grow and grow without hindrance. Jesus is the king of the universe.

And he's at work today through his church by his spirit as his word is proclaimed and taught with all boldness and without hindrance.

His gospel, says Luke, is unstoppable. So be encouraged and keep on with that task of proclaiming with all boldness and without hindrance.

Let's pray. Father, we thank you for your word and we thank you for its encouragement to us this evening.

[36 : 15] And we ask that we would be encouraged, that we would be given courage as Paul was to keep on with that great task of proclaiming and teaching.

Knowing that you're a God who keeps your promises. So please help us to respond to your word, not by sight, not by what we observe in the world, but by what you have said.

Please help us to be a people of faith. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.