

## 5. Godly Perseverance

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] We're going to turn to the scriptures and read, and we're going to be in the Acts of the Apostles, Book of Acts, Chapter 28. Andy has been so helpfully and usefully teaching us from some of these later passages in Acts.

What an encouragement they've been to us, especially at this time in our church's life. And it's a great encouragement to us, isn't it, when we find that every time we open the scriptures, it seems like these things have been written just for us in all the world and just for this particular time.

Did you feel that this morning? I certainly did. And I'm sure it will be the same as we read together this evening. So we're going to read Acts, Chapter 28, from verse 11 through to the end of the chapter, which takes us to the end of what is recorded of Paul's apostolic ministry and how it continued in his semi-captivity in Rome.

So Acts, Chapter 28 and verse 11. After three months, we set sail in a ship that had wintered in the island, a ship of Alexandria, with the twin gods as a figurehead.

Putting in at Syracuse, we stayed there for three days, and from there we made a circuit and arrived in Regium. And after one day, a south wind sprang up. And on the second day, we came to Puteili.

[ 1 : 3 1 ] There we find brothers, and we were invited to stay with them for seven days. And so we came to Rome. And the brothers there, when they heard about us, 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 soldier 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 had 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 have asked to see you and speak with you, since it is because of the hope of Israel that I am wearing this chain. 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, but we desire to hear from you what your views are.

[ 2 : 5 6 ] For with regard to this sect, that is the Christians, we know that everywhere it is spoken against. When they had 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. 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.

[ 4 : 03 ] Therefore, let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles. 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. May God bless to us this, his word. Let's take our books and sing again.

Hymn number 857. 857. Jesus calls above the tumult, saying, Christian, follow me.

Number 857. Amen. Well, please do sit down, and please turn to Acts chapter 28, and as you're doing that, let me pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you so much, once again, for the wonderful privilege of the very words of God in our own language, and freedom to gather around and learn from them together.

[ 5 : 36 ] We thank you for this great privilege, and pray that we might make the most of it this evening. We pray that you would speak to us, whatever our situation in life. Teach us what we need to learn.

And please be at work in our lives for our good and for your glory as a result. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Once bitten, twice shy runs the proverb.

Simple idea, isn't it? If something goes really badly the first time, it's so easy to wimp out on having a second go at it. It's the ethos that lies behind really good rugby tackling.

Hit a chap hard enough the first time he runs at you, and he'll probably be half a yard slower the next time he runs at you. It's very simple. It's the reason why many people find it hard to do things that would be good for them to do.

They had a bad time trying last time. It's too difficult to try again. Sometimes churches can have that. We tried that once, and it was a disaster. We're definitely not trying that again.

[ 6 : 48 ] The thing about that way of thinking is that it makes so much sense. Why, unless you were a very strange person, would you ever want to have another go at something that went badly the first time?

It's a good question. And it's one that any Christian will have to answer from time to time. Why keep on with gospel living and gospel speaking when the last time I tried to stand up for the right thing or speak up for the right thing, it all went horribly wrong.

Why? Trivial example. I have a good friend. He tried to get into conversation about Christianity with his hairdresser. He went in, sat in the chair, they exchanged pleasantries.

The hairdresser asked, what do you do for a job? My friend at that time was working for a church. He replied, the Church of England pays me to persuade people like you to become Christians.

Quick as a flash, you came here for a haircut. Now, don't you think, he's a bold fellow, he'd have another go, I reckon, but don't you think next time he was asked that question, he was just a little more hesitant to have a go?

[ 8 : 04 ] You'll know situations like that in your own life if you're a Christian. You try to say the right thing in the right way and the door slams shut. I do not want to talk about that.

And it is the most natural thing in the world not to want to go there again. Why would you want? Well, here in this chapter, we have a great example of not doing the once bitten, twice shy thing.

And it's a great example of how the gospel subverts that once bitten, twice shy principle. we're in our last visit to these later, rather darker chapters in the book of Acts.

In many ways, chapter 28 is the climax of the story, though it's a rather alternative climax to a great story. We've been with the Apostle Paul on the road to Rome since the middle of chapter 19.

These have been chapters of constant geographical change from one place to another and to another. But though the geography has changed, Paul's situation has not changed.

[ 9 : 14 ] Since chapter 21, Paul has been in captivity. And these captivity chapters, though there are only few in number, span at least four years of his life.

It's a long time, covered in a short space. Now, in terms of Paul's work, these chapters have their mix of ups and downs.

Sometimes he's well-received, sometimes he's not well-received. So, for example, in chapter 27, on the way to Rome, in the boat with the sailors during the shipwreck, Paul is very well-received.

He goes down well. They listen to him, they take his advice, they do what he says, they're glad he's there. After he lands, chapter 28, verse 14 and 15, he's encouraged by Christian brothers.

He's well-received. However, when he reaches Rome, he meets with a much more mixed response. Verse 24 and 25, we see unbelief, disagreement, rejection, as well as some acceptance.

[ 10 : 23 ] The reception is mixed. And there are ups and downs in Paul's circumstances. as well. Negatively speaking, he's a prisoner awaiting trial.

Positively, chapter 28, he's allowed to live by himself, verse 16. His accommodation is his own, probably rented. He's guarded by only one soldier, and usually a Roman prisoner would have had two guards.

He's attached to the guard by a chain, but people are allowed to come and go freely. There's great freedom in this last chapter. Paul's circumstances, are up and down. Now, the chapter comes to us in three little scenes.

Verse 17 to 22, we have an initial meeting with Jewish leaders in Rome. Verse 23 to 28, a second meeting a few days later with a much wider selection of the Jewish community, and then a kind of unfinished scene at the end.

Verse 30 and 31, with all kinds of people coming and going. I'm going to look at this under two main headings. First, in this chapter we see a Christ-like perseverance.

[ 11 : 39 ] Paul has only been in Rome for three days, verse 17, and he sends for the Jewish leaders. And he does this, it would seem, because he wants to correct any misinformation that they may have had about him.

Let me read these few verses. Verse 17, after three days, he called together the local leaders of the Jews, and when they gathered he said to them, Brothers, though I'd 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 examined me they wished me 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 speak with you, since it is because of the hope of Israel that I'm wearing this chain. Now, much of this is very much what we've seen so far of Paul in captivity in this book.

So much is familiar if you've been with us. As usual, he's very direct and straightforward. He just tells it as it is. This is what happened. This is what the Romans thought.

[ 12 : 58 ] So here I am. I had to appeal to Caesar, and that's why I've arrived in Rome. He just tells it the way it is. As usual, he seems very keen to quash any false rumors that may have come their way.

Did you notice that? Verse 17, I'm not here because I've done anything against our people and the customs of our ancestors. You may have heard that, but that's not why I'm here.

Verse 19, I'm not here because I want to bring any counter charge against our people and get anyone into trouble. You may think that, but that's not why I'm here.

In fact, I am here, verse 20, because of loyalty to the Jewish hope. It's because of the hope of Israel that I'm wearing this chain.

Now, slightly as an aside, if you've been with us in this series, you'll know that false accusations are very much an expected part of the work of the gospel.

[ 14 : 03 ] Hear the words of the Lord Jesus in Matthew chapter 5. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely, on my account.

Jesus expects that his people will be falsely accused on his account. Paul expects chapter 28 and previously in this book that he will be falsely accused.

Can I say, brothers and sisters, if you or the church or the leaders of your church are falsely accused in the course of ministry, do not be surprised about that for a second.

There is nothing whatever that's unusual about that. And don't get tired of gentle correction of false rumors. Do you see what Paul does here? He's proactive in correcting what they may have heard just in case they've heard wrong.

And it turns out, verse 21, that they haven't heard any bad news of him yet, which I guess must have been a relief. And so they want to hear what he has to say for himself. And so they come back and they have a long meeting, verse 23, all day long, in which from the scriptures, Paul tries to convince them about Jesus.

[ 15 : 31 ] As usual, there's a mixed response. verse 24, verse 24, such a common response in this book. Some were convinced by what he said, but others disbelieved.

Verse 25 is also a common situation in this book. Disagreement among Jewish people. It's been quite characteristic that Paul exposes areas of conflict within Judaism.

They end up disagreeing with one another because of what he says. Not for the first time, there are negative words from Paul about the Jewish state of heart towards God.

Look at verse 26. He quotes from the prophet Isaiah from chapter 6. It's the longest quotation in this book from the Old Testament.

It's the first since chapter 15. It's a very notable quotation. It's pretty strong and it's strongly applied. Isaiah in chapter 6 spoke of the people of his day being blind and deaf to the truth about God.

[ 16 : 41 ] And Jesus uses these same words in Mark chapter 4 to refer to Israel's rejection of his own ministry. And here Paul does the same thing. If you people won't hear, well God's in control and there will be people who do.

Now, let me just say, so much then about this is familiar. There are many things one could usefully observe about this chapter, but the first thing I'm going to note is how very much Paul's attitude here is not once bitten, twice shy.

He knows what's likely to happen. He knows what people are likely to think. He knows that when he speaks he's likely to get a very mixed response, some hostility, some not.

indeed he knows theologically that the scripture says his people are hard hearted towards God. He knows that to some extent his ministry is like that of Isaiah, from whom he quotes.

He's being sent to people who are unwilling to listen. That's what got him here in the first place. He's in Rome now because of the hostility of Jewish people towards him.

[ 17 : 58 ] Jerusalem. That's what he expects to find when he arrives at Jerusalem. And lo and behold, that's what he finds when he arrives at Jerusalem. Does it stop him saying the right thing though?

It does not. He knows what's likely to happen. It does happen. Does it stop him saying the right thing? It does not stop him saying the right thing.

It doesn't stop him speaking proactively to these Jewish leaders. He's eager to get him there first before they hear any bad publicity from elsewhere. He's eager for them to hear the good news about Jesus, though he knows that he's going to receive a degree of hostility as a result.

Now, is that not remarkable? Is that not remarkable? After such a long time in captivity, more than four years, consider, if you were to summarize Paul's life experience in the book of Acts, you'd have to say that the gospel has not been a comfortable lifestyle choice for him, would you not?

He's not had a nice time doing gospel work in this book. Again and again, he's found himself at odds with his own people, hurt, rejected, beaten, threatened with death, misunderstood, misrepresented, again and again.

[ 19 : 30 ] He has not had a nice time doing this, but he keeps doing it. Is that not remarkable? How like Jesus that is, don't you think?

Jesus who did not turn away from his course of action, when the hostility mounted, when his people rejected him, when his friends deserted him.

It is so like Jesus to keep doing the right thing when the right thing becomes difficult to do. We have some friends, they were gospel workers in another country.

One night their house was broken into. the night watchman who was at the door was shot dead. The husband of the family was shot in the head, lost an eye, lost a hearing in one ear, lost a fair bit of mental function.

It was down in the books as a burglary, but everybody thinks it was because he's a Christian worker in a hostile country. What's the first thing that couple does when they're well enough?

[ 20 : 47 ] While he's still having reconstructive surgery and still had many operations to come, what's the first thing they do when they can? Right back to the same country, the same place, doing the same work with the same people.

How like Jesus that is, don't you think? Doing again the same thing that got them into trouble the last time. Sometimes it is very difficult to keep gospeling, especially when your efforts are met with hostility or even with indifference.

But once bitten, twice shy is not the principle that should govern our behavior in this matter. Isaiah was not a once bitten, twice shy man, was he?

Nor was Jesus, nor was the apostle Paul. Friends, we need to keep helping one another with that, praying for one another in that. It doesn't come naturally, does it?

One spit and twice shy comes just so naturally to us, to me anyway. But we see in this chapter a Christ-like perseverance, doing the same thing even though it's not gone well before.

[ 22 : 10 ] second thing we see in this chapter is an unchained word. The apostle is in chains, well one chain at least.

This is why I'm wearing this chain, he says. During our brief encounter with these later chapters, we've covered several years of ministry, all of it in captivity, at least four years of prisoner.

And let me say that it has not been recorded as though the growth of the gospel in that time was very dramatic. We just don't know much about the growth of the gospel in that time.

Most of the narrative deals with Paul in captivity, talking to one official or another, one group of people or another. Very limited. There are no records of dramatic conversions in this part of the book at all, after chapter 19.

And yet, as the story slows down, grinding slow in various points. And as the walls draw in tighter on the apostle's life, God's word is not chained.

[ 23 : 20 ] Did you notice Paul has great boldness in speaking? Verse 31, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance, even if he's in chains, there's always the guard to talk to, the guy he's chained to.

I think this accounts for his mention in Philippians chapter 1 of the fact that his captivity has resulted in the whole palace guard hearing about his reasons for being in chains. You can imagine the slightly comic picture flashes up in your imagination as you imagine one by one the palace guards coming up for apostle guarding duty.

Oh no, not again. We'll be worked over again with this message about Jesus. But despite his chains, Paul has great freedom.

People coming and going, ability to talk to anyone who comes about whatever he wants. The man is in captivity, his message is not captive.

Now this is something we need to take on board, I think. In life, we often, in different ways, at different times, have a sense of being hemmed in by our circumstances.

[ 24 : 37 ] We often feel very limited. Do you not often feel very limited in life? I feel very limited in life much of the time. Do you not feel that you can't really serve the Lord properly because you're so limited by your situation?

There's so many things that we love to do, love to be able to do, but can't because we have to do this and that and the other. For so much of our time, we have to look after our children so we don't feel as free as we once did.

We have to do a difficult job so we aren't as free to do all the other things we'd like to do. We have people who need to be looked after. We wish that we had more flexibility in life.

We can wish that we were married or weren't married. Then we'd be able to serve the Lord better, we dream. Haven't you thought to yourself, if only things were different, I could be much more useful as a Christian.

Have you not thought that? You see, we think that our limitations limit God's work. Of course, we're not all in prison, and there are things in life that we are free to change.

[ 25 : 49 ] sometimes we have opportunity to change the things that constrain us, but we need to think again about that basic assumption that our limitations limit God's work.

It's just simply not true. Our limitations are not unknown to God, are they? They're not outside his control. Your situation in life, your responsibilities in life, your health or lack of it, your basic personality and gifts, are they outside of God's knowledge and control?

Of course not. They are the product of God's knowledge and control, all of them. All of them are known. And the people he brings across our path are not there by accident.

Our work colleagues, our friends, our family members that we have to look out for, God has brought them there. They might be our doctors and nurses.

If you find yourself sick and in hospital, well, God has brought the doctors and nurses to your bedside. You see, God's word is not limited by our constraint.

[ 26 : 58 ] God's word is free. Why? Well, there's a practical, pragmatic answer. You can't be stopped from speaking by locking you up, not unless they shut you away and there's no window or door and no guards ever visit you and you starve to death.

Of course, you're rather limited in who you can talk to then. You can always pray, of course, for the advance of the gospel. The person who doesn't mind dying is under no one's control.

Nobody can stop you speaking. But there is a deeper theological answer. God is free. God is absolutely free to do whatever he wants with you, with your life, with every circumstance.

God is free. He's not limited by our chains. And that I think is what this quotation from Isaiah is doing here. Is God limited by Jewish rejection of his message?

Answer, no, not at all. If people reject the message, he's well able to make some hear, and he's also able to take it to people who will hear.

[ 28 : 07 ] That's what has happened, says Paul. The message has been sent to non-Jews. Verse 28, let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles.

They will listen. As a nation, you may not, some of you may, nationally you may not, but the Gentiles will listen. You see, God is free.

Nothing can hold him in, nothing can constrain him. Your circumstances in life are small. He's not constrained by them. anyone can have the gospel message.

Anyone God wants. And so once bitten twice shy is not an appropriate response to limitation in life.

No, a godly perseverance is the appropriate thing, because God's word is not chained. punishment. Now, can I say that this is both challenging and encouraging?

[ 29 : 13 ] It's challenging because the big issue for our personal usefulness is not our constraint, our circumstances, but our attitude.

You can envisage somebody different from Paul not viewing imprisonment in Rome quite so positively, can't you? He has a heart for the message of the gospel.

And that is a challenge because often I think if only circumstances would be different. Actually, the issue is not the circumstances, but my heart, what I want to happen, that's the issue.

So there's a big challenge in this passage, but there is also great encouragement. God is in control of the apostle's circumstances, absolutely in control.

He does not see himself being limited by those. They're God-given things. And so, brothers and sisters, so are our circumstances, God-given things.

[ 30 : 22 ] Our personality, our responsibilities, the things we have to do in life, they are God-given things. They're not enemies of his purposes. They're part of his purposes.

We do not have to escape them to be doing what he wants us to do. That is a great encouragement. At least I find it so. There is also encouragement in the final verse, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.

boldness. The encouragement here is that I think in this book, boldness is something that God produces in people. Turn back, would you quickly, to chapter 4.

Right back to Acts chapter 4. verse 4. This is the first bit of hostility that there is against the message. And basically the apostles have been imprisoned, threatened, released, and they pray.

And they pray in 4:29. Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness.

[ 31 : 38 ] And verse 31, when they prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with all boldness.

Now, this is some bedtime reading, some homework for you to do, stuff to follow up in your own studies in this book. Look in the book of Acts for the link between the Spirit of God and bold human speaking.

So often you will find in this book, so and so was filled with the Spirit and said. So and so was filled with the Spirit and spoke.

And it goes on again and again and again and again through this book. The great work of the Spirit in this book is to put words in people's mouth in difficult circumstances about Jesus.

And that's the note the book finishes on. Chapter 28, verse 31. He welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.

[ 32 : 49 ] Might we not pray that God would give us his Spirit and make us bold in speech, whatever our circumstances are.

Now, we're not all the same, are we? There are some naturally bold people and some naturally unbold people. And different people are useful in different circumstances. Sometimes a naturally bold person is a really useful person.

Sometimes a naturally unbold person is exactly what somebody needs to just say the right word at the right time. It nearly always involves courage at the right time to speak the right word.

word. But there's a great assurance in this book that God is able to give his Spirit to his people and enable them to speak boldly.

If you think that's all your own work to generate, well, that's an enormous burden. If you think that's something God will give to you, then that's a great encouragement. Let's pray together.

[ 33 : 53 ] We confess to you, gracious God, that often we view our circumstances in life as a hindrance, something outside of your control, something that gets in the way of your work, something that limits our usefulness.

But we thank you that nothing in life is an accident, nothing about the way we're made, or the places you've put us in, or the people you bring us into contact with, or the responsibilities you give us, or the difficulties that we have to manage.

Nothing is unknown and accidental to you. And so we pray, Heavenly Father, that you would help us to remember that your word is not chained by our circumstances.

And we pray, please, that you would indeed fill us with your Holy Spirit and help us with boldness to speak the right words at the right time.

Lord, we thank you for the challenge of this passage and also for its great encouragements. And we pray that you would please help us to learn from the Apostle and to learn from this book and to rejoice that though life may be difficult and our circumstances stretching, you are free and your message is free.

[ 35 : 43 ] Hear us, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.