

PROCLAIMING THE KINGDOM OF GOD WITHOUT HINDRANCE

Acts 28:11–31

Key Verses: 28:30–31

“He lived there for 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.”

Imagine a massive letdown: you’ve spent years fighting to get to your life’s goal, and when you finally arrive, you’re not a hero; you’re a prisoner in chains, stuck in a rented apartment. By any standard, Paul’s mission in Rome was hindered. Yet, the book of Acts closes Paul’s story with a shocking claim: for two whole years, he was “proclaiming the kingdom of God...without hindrance.” How can a man chained to a Roman guard be unhindered? That’s our central question today. What was God doing in and through Paul? How could God use him in his situation? What can we learn from him? May God speak to us today.

The main theme of Acts is to be witnesses of Jesus (1:8). In the second half Paul sets the example. And already we’ve heard some of the final words of this most exemplary witness of Jesus. He told the Ephesian elders, “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood” (20:28). Later, he finished speaking to a non-Christian audience in Caesarea with these words: “I would to God that not only you but also all who hear me this day might become such as I am—except for these chains” (26:29). Now, at the end of his story, Paul the witness is still in chains, and we see what he’s doing.

But arriving at this end has not been easy. Ever since he went to Jerusalem, Paul has experienced serious threats to his life. He’s been nearly flogged, struck on the mouth, and almost torn to pieces.¹ They plotted to ambush and kill him, he was left in prison in Caesarea for two years, then they plotted to ambush and kill him again.² The Roman governor, to compromise with the Jews, tried to move his trial to Jerusalem, where he surely would have been killed.³ Then, on his way to Rome, Paul was nearly killed by a storm at sea, almost executed with other prisoners, and finally, on a Malta beach, was bitten by a viper.⁴ Rarely has anyone ever been through so many threats and dangers.

Why has all this been happening to Paul? It’s because he’s so clear about the gospel of Jesus. People don’t want to hear it. Even more, the devil doesn’t want him to spread it. The devil is out to hinder Paul in every possible way (1

¹ 22:22–25; 23:2,10.

² 23:12–16; 24:27; 25:1–3.

³ 25:7–9.

⁴ 27:18–20,42–43; 28:3–6.

Thes.2:18). If he were a sleepy Christian, no one would bother with him. But because he's so passionate about spreading the gospel, the devil is constantly attacking him. Today the devil is still scheming to hinder the gospel's spread.⁵ But Paul's story shows us that God is always working to accomplish his own plan.

Back in Ephesus, through two whole years of daily Bible studies, Paul experienced how the gospel of Jesus spread to residents in the entire province of Asia (19:9–10). Through it, the Holy Spirit gave Paul conviction that he would someday also see Rome (19:21). Over a year later, before the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem, an argument about Paul got violent. The following night the Lord stood beside him and said, "Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome" (23:11). About two and a half years later, in the midst of the storm at sea, an angel stood before Paul and said he would survive to stand before Caesar in Rome (27:23–24). Now, after almost four years since he first mentioned it, Paul finally arrives in Rome. After all he's been through, only God's own hand could have brought him here.

Now Paul has left the Jewish world and is being immersed in the Gentile world. So, on his ship from Malta we see twin pagan gods that contrast with the living God (11). But we also see God's quiet providence in the ship's rapid travel up to Puteoli (12–13; map). What is Puteoli like? It's a harbor city on the deep waters of the Bay of Naples, which makes it perfect for receiving large ships.⁶ Puteoli is like "Grand Central Station" for all the grain shipments constantly coming to Rome, 150 miles to the north. It's one of the most important ports in the Roman Empire, with about 100,000 people, bustling, rich, full of merchants, sailors, soldiers, and immigrants from all over the world.

Look at verse 14. "Found" doesn't mean they bumped into them; they knew these brothers were there and searched for them. Julius the centurion again trusted Paul to go spend time with their friends in this city. Paul was always looking for brothers in Christ in order to bless and be blessed. It adds that Paul and his team "were invited to stay with them for seven days." It's not just for lodging, but to worship on the Lord's Day, and to have time to learn from Paul and have fellowship. God is again using Paul as a shepherd for his people.

Look at verse 15a. The brothers in Rome hear about Paul and his team and come in person to welcome them on the Appian Way (picture). The Appian Way is a famous, heavily traveled, well-maintained Roman road. Its route toward Puteoli has some famous stops: the Forum of Appius and the Three Taverns, where people stay the night. These brothers are happy to walk all the way from

⁵ The devil makes people spiritually blind (2 Cor.4:4). He's constantly trying to devour believers (1 Pet.5:8) through doubt, sin, discouragement, and division. He is in all-out spiritual warfare against the church's mission to bring the light of Christ to this present darkness (Eph.6:12). So it's no surprise that today, in spreading the gospel of Jesus, there will always be all kinds of hindrances.

⁶ Centuries earlier, Puteoli began as a Greek colony (531 BC); later it became a Roman one (195 BC).

Rome to greet God's servant, Paul. Read verse 15b. Paul's been through so much. He's endured so much opposition. He must be worn out in many ways. But when he sees these brothers who've walked over 30 miles to greet him, he experiences how much they love him. It brings him deep comfort. It shows him all his suffering was not in vain. Their presence fills Paul with thanks to God and gives him new courage to go on.

Look at verse 16. This arrangement happens no doubt through Julius. It shows us how much Paul is trusted. He can stay by himself, with just a soldier to guard him. These soldiers come, one by one, in shifts, and Paul is chained to each one. It's probably not how Paul had planned to live in Rome, but it's God's plan. By being chained to him, each soldier has the chance to learn of the gospel of Jesus, through involuntarily listening to Paul preaching and teaching.⁷

So what does he do first? Look at verse 17a. We've already seen how much Paul suffered because of his own people's rejection. So, why would he invite them first? He's following the principle, "to the Jew first" (Rom.1:16). Paul believes the Jewish people first need to hear the good news of their long-awaited Messiah. Despite their rejection and persecution, Paul never stops sharing Jesus with them.⁸ Look at verse 20. Here Paul repeats what he said during his trials: "it is because of the hope of Israel that I am wearing this chain."⁹ As Jews, they all share this hope. But what these Jewish leaders don't realize is that this hope of Israel is Jesus. Jesus is the true hope of Israel because he rose from the dead. His resurrection made him both Lord and Christ (2:36). He's the hope not just of Israel, but of the whole world. Paul is so deeply committed to the hope of Israel, Jesus, he's more than willing to wear "this chain." "This chain" is the real, tangible way Paul is showing us a good example of suffering with our Lord Jesus.¹⁰

No new news about Paul has reached these Jewish leaders (21). But they've heard negative reports about the Christian movement (22).¹¹ The gospel of Jesus is not political, but it is controversial. It calls for radical and honest repentance, and a whole life commitment to Jesus. He challenges our pride and desire to rely on ourselves. His cross rebukes our self-righteousness, worldliness, unforgiveness, and divisiveness. So those who don't want to repent of these things will always oppose the gospel (Luke 2:34b). But Paul is undeterred, because he knows God himself works powerfully through the gospel.

Look at verse 23. The Jewish leaders schedule a formal hearing. As a prisoner Paul can't go to them, so they come to him at his lodging, in great

⁷ See Phil.1:12-14; 2 Tim.2:9.

⁸ He first clarifies that he's not anti-Jewish, a dangerous criminal, or coming to Rome to complain about what the Jews have done to him (17b-19).

⁹ Cf. 23:6; 24:15; 26:6-7.

¹⁰E.g. Luke 9:23; Rom.8:17; Phil.3:10; Col.1:24; 2 Cor.4:10-11.

¹¹ In fact, it was this controversy about Christ that got many Jews expelled from Rome about ten years earlier (18:2).

numbers. It's not a half-hour sermon, but an all-day, intense dialogue. Paul is not stirring up emotions; he's "expounding," meaning to "explain," systematically and logically. He's going through all the aspects of the gospel. It says he's "testifying," but not just with words; he's staking his life on what he's saying, because he himself has experienced it. And he's pointing them "to the kingdom of God." Acts begins (1:3) and ends (28:23,31) with the good news of God's kingdom. It's not a human kingdom for one people or one race. It's God's kingdom. It's the living hope God wants to give all people of all nations. The kingdom of God is God's rule breaking into the world through Jesus. Through Jesus, God wants to give sinful people his saving grace and living hope. Thank you Jesus for your saving grace and living hope for me, and for all people. So Paul is "trying to convince them about Jesus." Jesus is the only way for sinners to receive this grace and living hope. God's kingdom still breaks into our world today when people receive Jesus. "From the Law of Moses and the Prophets" means from the Old Testament. The whole Old Testament points us to Jesus as God's way to his kingdom. It tells us that faith in Jesus is from God, and it's reasonable.

How do they respond? Look at verse 24. Some are convinced; others disbelieve. Then things take a turn for the worse when Paul rebukes them with Isaiah's prophecy (25–27).¹² We're unbelieving not because the gospel is unreasonable, but because our hearts are dulled by sin. It's the problem not just of the Jews, but of all people. We can't just listen to the gospel; we need to take the time to seriously repent. And when we share it, we need to ask God to open people's hearts to truly repent. If anyone turns to God in true repentance and faith in Jesus, he heals us. Look at verse 28. The Gentiles means all the humble people in the world ready to listen. When privileged people refuse the gospel, God turns to unlikely people. It was God's way of working in Paul's time, and it's how God still works. God's reign coming into this broken world sick with sin is not for the proud and elite, but for the humble and repentant. Paul is sure God will send people ready to listen to this good news of God's kingdom through Jesus.

This dramatic exchange of words leads us to today's climax, which is strangely "domestic." Read verses 30–31. There's no showdown with Caesar, no mass revival. Instead, the final image of Acts is small and quiet: a prisoner, supporting himself, simply welcoming everyone, and boldly proclaiming Jesus for two years. And doing it in chains. Is it relevant? Yes, very. It's because we all have our own "chains." They are the hard things in life that seem to hold us down. They may be our studies, our jobs, our debts, our responsibilities, our problems, or our relationships. These "chains" can seem like a real hindrance. But Paul was not hindered by his chains. Why? His heart was free in our Lord Jesus and his grace. His heart was filled with God's love poured out by the Holy Spirit. His heart was abounding with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit

¹² All four Gospels quote these words from Isaiah when describing how the Jews responded to Jesus with unbelief.

(Rom.15:13). His heart was filled with the righteousness, peace and joy of God's kingdom through the Holy Spirit (Rom.14:17), Without the Holy Spirit, no one can be full of these things. As we experience our "chains" and our disappointments, we just inwardly grumble, complain and despair. We have no power to proclaim the living hope of God's kingdom and the saving grace of Jesus. But when we experience the presence of the Holy Spirit, our inner person is transformed. He fills us in Christ with hope and peace and joy and love.

Read verses 30–31 again. Filled with the Spirit, Paul was a giver, living at his own expense. Filled with the Spirit, he was welcoming anyone who came to him. Filled with the Spirit, he was a Christ-like witness of Jesus (1:8). Filled with the Spirit, he was bold. Filled with the Spirit, God enabled him to overcome all hindrances. Filled with the Spirit, he could speak God's message of salvation in a way that could move and change people's hearts. Filled with the Spirit, Paul, unhindered, began writing his "prison letters" that circulated to many believers.¹³ Through Paul, a Christ-centered, Spirit-filled witness, the gospel could cross all kinds of barriers and reach all kinds of people. Just as in Ephesus, through his daily, Christ-centered, kingdom-centered, Spirit-filled Bible studies, for two whole years, the true gospel could really penetrate and take root in Rome. We may be tied down by a health problem or care for a loved one and literally have no time to go anywhere. We may not write letters, but we can meet online unhindered.

Today there are many quiet, unhindered people serving like Paul. There's a pre-med student among us. She's chained to the study of organic chemistry. But she's graceful and joyful to build others up in Jesus. She's unhindered. There's an architecture student among us. His studies are hard. But he's full of the joy of sharing Jesus with other students. He's unhindered. There's a mom among us with two young kids who's working as a nurse. Still, she makes time to go to the campus and invite students to Bible study. She's unhindered. There's a woman among us in her seventies. But she's on campus all day, several days a week, sharing God's word with thirsty students. She's unhindered. There's a man who almost got killed on the mission field for sharing Jesus with Muslims. Now he has to live separately from his wife and children. But he's constantly making friends with non-Christians and joyfully serving many in our community. He's unhindered.

The book of Acts gives us this final image. It's not a triumphant procession, but a quiet scene: Paul, chained, yet welcoming, teaching, and boldly proclaiming Jesus. His heart is free and filled with the hope of God's kingdom. He's a joyful giver, and a Spirit-filled witness. Read verses 30–31 again. May God free us from our fear, burdens, and discouragements, fill us with the Holy Spirit, and make us bold, unhindered witnesses of Jesus, regardless of our present "chains."

¹³ Ephesians, Philipians, Colossians, Philemon.