

This is a strange way to end a book.

Acts ends with Paul sitting in prison.

I suppose that it is possible that Luke was sitting next to him,
writing this and then sending it off to Theophilus.

But if that was the case,
then it would make more sense for Luke to conclude by saying,
“and so we wait here to see what God will do next.”

If the point of the story was what happens to Paul,
then the ending is not particularly satisfying.

But then again,
Paul has never been the point of the story.
Paul has been useful in Luke’s narrative,
because he illustrates the point that a servant is not greater than his master.

But the story has never been about Paul.
From start to finish, the story has been about what Jesus continued to do and to teach
through his apostles.
Acts is the story of how the Spirit came upon the apostles,
and they were Jesus’ witnesses in Jerusalem,
and in all Judea and Samaria,
and to the end of the earth.

It really doesn’t matter whether Paul lives or dies.
What matters is that the message of the gospel of Jesus
continues to go to the end of the earth.

And in fact, we see that in the very way that Luke ends his narrative.

Introduction: From Malta to Rome (28:11-16)

Luke tells us that they stayed for three months on Malta.

Their last ship had been a ship of Alexandria.
And once again they find a ship of Alexandria that had wintered there on the island.
But this one has a figurehead of the twin gods,
Castor and Pollux.

You can almost imagine the ship as it sails out of the harbor to Syracuse, Rhegium, and Puteoli,
where they found brothers.

Even before the apostles had come to Italy,
the gospel has already arrived there.

And when Paul is still some way outside the city,

the brothers from Rome came to meet them.

And on seeing them, Paul thanked God and took courage.

Paul appears to have been rather nervous about what he was going to face.

He is going to face Caesar.

Will he have to face Caesar alone?

He knows that there is a Christian community in Rome.

(He had written the epistle to the Romans just a few months or years before).

But how will they respond to him?

Their initial response is quite encouraging.

They come out to meet him in order to accompany him back to Rome,
thereby demonstrating their love and support for him.

1. The Hope of Israel: Paul's First Meeting with the Jews of Rome (28:17-22)

When Paul arrived in Rome he called together the local leaders of the Jews
in order to make a defense of his conduct before them.

After all, he has come to Rome in chains,
as a prisoner to be brought before Caesar.

*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.*

Paul wants to make it clear, not only that he is innocent of their charges,
but also that he has not come to bring counter-charges.

Paul has no desire to make trouble for the Jews.

*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.*

What does Paul mean by the “hope of Israel”?

Israel's hope was that God would bring them through exile into the glory of his kingdom.

Israel's hope was the resurrection of the dead –

that at the end of history God would raise up his faithful Israel
and bring judgment against the nations.

And Paul says that he is in chains because of the hope of Israel.

And 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,

for with regard to this sect we know that everywhere it is spoken against.

From a Jewish perspective (at this time)
the Christian church was considered a “sect” of Judaism.

And once again, we see that while there was considerable opposition to this sect,
“everywhere it is spoken against,”
there was also considerable curiosity,
“we desire to hear from you.”

As we are seeing in the early church history class,
it may be that nearly half of the Jews in the Roman empire believed in Jesus.
We sometimes forget that as Paul goes from city to city
his initial converts are almost always Jews –
and they would continue to bear witness
to their family and friends in the Jewish community
long after Paul had moved on.

The Jewish community in Rome *wanted* to hear Paul’s teaching
because they too were waiting for the hope of Israel.

2. The Exposition of the Kingdom: Paul’s Second Meeting with the Jews of Rome (28:23-24)

And so they appointed a day for him to present his views.
And 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.*

At the end of Luke’s gospel (Luke 24)
Jesus expounded the scriptures concerning himself,
from the Law, the Prophets and the Psalms.
Now at the end of Acts
Paul does the same thing –
he expounds the scriptures concerning Jesus.
He sets forth the case that Jesus is in fact the hope of Israel,
because Jesus has been raised from the dead.

God had promised to Abraham that through Abraham’s seed
his blessing would come to the nations.
And so in the days of Joshua,
God had established his kingdom in Israel,
but throughout the era of the judges Israel had rebelled.

And so because of faithless Israel,
 God raised up David as a king after his own heart,
 and as long as the Davidic king served the LORD,
 God's blessing was upon Israel and Judah.
But David's house rebelled,
 and turned away – serving other gods.

And so God brought his curse upon the house of David,
 and upon the whole house of Israel,
 sending them into exile in 586 BC.
And even though the temple was rebuilt 70 years later,
 there was a very real sense in which Israel was still in exile.

They still served a foreign king.
The temple was rebuilt,
 but the kingdom of God had not been restored.

The promise to Abraham that all nations would be blessed through his seed
 seemed to have been forgotten.
The nations were not blessed through Israel –
 rather Israel was cursed by the nations!

And the hope of Israel was that God would remember his promises,
 restore the kingdom,
 and raise up faithful Israel to eternal glory.

And all day, from morning until evening,
Paul walked them through the scriptures, through the Law and the Prophets,
 testifying to the kingdom of God,
 trying to convince them that Jesus was indeed the Christ.

All that we have been expecting to happen to Israel at the end of history,
 has happened to Jesus in the middle of history.
In Jesus the kingdom of God has begun.
The resurrection of Jesus was the inauguration of the King!

Jesus has been seated on the throne of David!

How do I know?
 Because the Holy Spirit has been poured out upon his people.
Back on the day of Pentecost, in Acts 2,
 Peter had insisted that the coming of the Holy Spirit was the demonstration
 that Jesus is sitting at the right hand of the Father
 on the throne of David.

And some were convinced by what he said, but others disbelieved. (v24)

3. The Gentiles Will Listen: Paul's Conclusion (28:25-29)

Luke concludes this episode by drawing attention to Paul's final words.
He tells us that *disagreeing among themselves, they departed*.

But after saying that they departed,
when we think that Luke is finished with this episode,
he comes back with one statement that he believed
was the most important thing Paul said.

*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.*

We have seen throughout this section of Acts that Paul thought of himself as a prophet.
He now quotes from Isaiah 6,
the commissioning of the greatest prophet of the Old Testament.
In effect, he is saying
that even as Isaiah was sent to Judah in the last days of the northern kingdom,
so now he has been sent to Israel in these last days.

Paul is saying that even as this prophetic commission was true in Isaiah's day,
even so, it is more true today.

What the Holy Spirit said to Isaiah is even more fitting today.
And Paul says that he has inherited Isaiah's mission of warning and judgment.

And by putting this at the very end of Acts,
Luke now turns to us and proclaims this warning to us:

Beware.

You may not be a Jew, but you are an heir of the promises to Abraham.

Beware lest your heart grow dull!

The message of the book of Acts is that the last days have come.
The end of history has arrived in Jesus Christ.
All that God had promised in the Law and the Prophets
has come to pass in Jesus.

Therefore those who believe in him share in this great salvation.

As Paul adds,

*Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles;
They will listen!*

Remember what happened to Israel?

Do you know what happened to those who disregarded Isaiah's message?
They came under the wrath and curse of God and were sent into exile –
receiving the sign of God's eternal wrath and curse against sin.

The temple in Jerusalem was destroyed
and the people of God were dispersed to the four corners of the earth.

Do you know what happened just about the time that Luke wrote Acts?

In 70 AD the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed
and the Jews were dispersed to the four corners of the earth.

It may be that Luke was writing just after that event –
or it may be that he wrote just before.

But either way the message is the same!

The kingdom of God has come in Jesus Christ.
The salvation of God has been revealed in him!
Not only to the Jews but also to the Gentiles.

And God's promise is that the Gentiles will listen.

Conclusion: The End of the Earth (28:30-31)

Don't you wish that we knew what happened next?

Some say that Paul was killed then and there.

Others say that Paul was released

and that he fulfilled his hope to go to Spain (Rom 15:24),
but that a few years later he was arrested and executed in Rome.

I suspect that Luke wrote Acts after the death of Paul.

I suspect that Theophilus knew the end of the story already.

But Luke is not telling us the story of Paul.

He is telling us the story of the gospel of Jesus.

Paul is not the center of his own story!

And even so, *you* are not the center of your own story!

What Luke does in the book of Acts

is draw you into the narrative.
By leaving Paul in Rome,
Luke is saying “you don’t need to know what happened to Paul.”

Yes, a servant is like his master,
but a servant is NOT his master.
You are not saved by the death of Paul.
You are saved by the *preaching* of Paul,
because Paul preached Christ crucified –
he preached the death and resurrection of Jesus
as the coming of the Kingdom of God.

Also,
by leaving Paul in Rome at the end of the book of Acts,
the book is in one sense not really finished.

Luke had said that he would tell Theophilus how the promised Holy Spirit
would come upon the apostles,
and how they would be witnesses to Christ
in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.

In one sense that story is finished.
Paul has come to Rome – the end of the earth.

And yet in another sense Rome is only the beginning of the end of the earth.
Paul’s concluding words are not looking backwards, but forwards:
And they will listen!

And Luke concludes by speaking of the ongoing ministry of Paul in Rome:
*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.*

And so the ministry of the apostle Paul never ends.
The book of Acts ends here,
but the story of Acts continues.
The apostles died,
but the apostolic message continues to be proclaimed to the ends of the earth.

Church history is the continuation of the story of Acts –
the story of how the Spirit of God continued to work through the apostolic preaching.
And that story winds its way through the ages,
from Ignatius of Antioch, who died a martyr’s death in Rome in 107 AD,
to John Chrysostom, the golden-mouthed preacher who boldly proclaimed Christ
in Antioch and Constantinople;
from Antony of Egypt who in the 4th century went out to pray in the desert,

to Robert Grosseteste, the medieval bishop who led a reformation
of English preaching in the 13th century;
from Martin Luther, and the 16th century reformation,
to Francis Turretin, who faithfully defended the faith in the 17th century;
from Jonathan Edwards and the revivals of the 1730s in New England,
to Robert Jefferson Breckinridge, the hero of Old School Presbyterianism.

And that story moves across the ages – and across the face of the earth –
and that story is being played out this day in your hearing.

The Spirit of God continues working through the preaching of the Word,
the administration of the sacraments,
and the prayers of the people of God,
as the apostolic message comes to you.

Your life has been caught up in this narrative.

You are a part of the story of the Acts of the Apostles –
the things that Jesus continues to do and to teach to the ends of the earth.