

The end of Acts, but just the beginning

Littlebourne - 11th February 2024 - Acts 28:23-end

We started looking at Acts way back on the 22nd May 2022. That's almost 1 3/4 years that it's taken us to get through it, though we did have some breaks.

We left the story last week with Paul having reached Rome. After his appeal to Ceasar, he has been sent to Rome, under guard as a prisoner, and having survived the dangerous voyage there, he arrives and is under house arrest.

Paul would typically go to the synagogue when he reaches a new city - that's what we've seen him do everywhere he goes. But this time, being under guard, possibly even chained to his guard, as that was the Roman custom for some prisoners, the Jews have to come to him to hear what he has to say, rather than him going to them.

Word of his arrival has spread, and some of the Jews have turned up to hear about what he has to say. Paul has told them about his trials in Jerusalem and Ceasarea, news of which has apparently not reached these Jews in Rome. They say they've heard about this 'sect' as they call it, of Christianity, and wish to know more. We know there are Christians in Rome, because not only have some of them met Paul as he approached Rome, but Paul's earlier letter to the Roman church, written maybe three years prior, was directed to his brothers there that he was looking forward to meeting.

Now, more of the Jews come to see Paul and hear not just about Paul's experiences, but his defence of Christianity.

V23-24

23 When they had appointed a day for him, 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. 24 And some were convinced by what he said, but others disbelieved.

Now, the Jews come in greater numbers to hear Paul speak to them. They've explained that they are interested in what they called the 'sect' of Christianity, now they can hear about it in full.

As we've seen, Paul is stuck under house arrest, so they come to him. Paul spends all day talking to them - from morning until evening he expounds to them. This is no quick gospel presentation. Today, we often have the attitude that we should be able to give the gospel in as short a time as possible. Apologetics can become all about sound bites and snappy responses. But Paul takes all day to explain things.

Luke records that Paul 'testifies to the Kingdom of God' and that he uses the scriptures - the law and the prophets - to convince them about Jesus, the King of that Kingdom. Paul's presentation is deep and rooted in scripture.

Verse 24 tells us about the reponse. This is nothing new - we've seen this throughout Acts, we see it everywhere Paul has been, everywhere the gospel has been taken to. Some believe, and some don't. A polarised reponse. It's not that they didn't get a fair hearing - Paul took all day, and being under house arrest, I'm sure had plenty of time on his hands for further questions. But as we've observed, there are no neutral reactions to the message of Christ - the gospel divides people. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 1:18):

For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

V25-28

25 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:

26

*“Go to this people, and say,
“You will indeed hear but never understand,
and you will indeed see but never perceive.”*

27

*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.’*

*28 Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the
Gentiles; they will listen.”*

There's disagreement amongst those that have come to hear Paul. Now Paul finishes up, after a day of speaking to them, with a citation from Isaiah.

Paul says 'The Holy Spirit spoke rightly'. We might think, well of course He did, why this redundancy? Paul may be making clear to those listening to him that what he is about to say is something that they believe is from God - these are Jews that he's talking to, who supposedly believe what their scriptures say. Paul is in effect saying that what he's about to cite is true, whether you like it or not.

He quotes from Isaiah chapter 6. You might remember what happens in the sixth chapter of Isaiah:

Isaiah has a great vision of the Lord God. He is transported to the throne room where he hears the angels singing 'Holy, Holy, Holy'. He quickly realises his unholiness in the face of true holiness and says (Isaiah 6v5):

*... 'Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the
King, the Lord of hosts!'*

Then, one of the angels takes a burning coal, places it to Isaiah's lips and pronounces Isaiah clean - his sin is atoned for.

I wonder if this particular passage was a favourite of Paul's. His experience on the road to Damascus is sort of similar - he sees Christ, the Lord. He realises his sin and the atoning power of Christ. He is smitten - blinded, rather than the blistered lips of Isaiah.

Isaiah 6v8:

8 And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Then I said, "Here I am! Send me."

After Isaiah has said this, comes the part that Paul quotes, verse 9 onwards:

And he said, "Go, and say to this people:

*"Keep on hearing, but do not understand;
keep on seeing, but do not perceive."*

*10 Make the heart of this people dull,
and their ears heavy,
and blind their eyes;
lest they see with their eyes,
and hear with their ears,
and understand with their hearts,
and turn and be healed."*

This part of Isaiah is quoted elsewhere in the New Testament. Paul uses a phrase from here in his earlier letter to the Romans. But where you may remember it being used in by Jesus, as he talks to the disciples explaining the purpose of parables. Matthew (13v14-15), Mark (4v12) and Luke (8v10) record Jesus using this scripture to explain that his words would fall on deaf ears.

Jesus also uses this scripture in John 12:

37 Even after Jesus had performed so many signs in their presence, they still would not believe in him. 38 This was to fulfill the word of Isaiah the prophet:

*"Lord, who has believed our message
and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?"*

39 For this reason they could not believe, because, as Isaiah says elsewhere:

40 *“He has blinded their eyes
and hardened their hearts,
so they can neither see with their eyes,
nor understand with their hearts,
nor turn—and I would heal them.”*

41 *Isaiah said this because he saw Jesus’ glory and spoke about him.*

(As an aside, notice that last part - Isaiah saw Jesus' glory and spoke about Him - the Lord, Yahweh, that Isaiah saw in the throneroom was Christ Jesus.)

There are those that hear the gospel and can really *hear* it. There are those that see what is written in scripture and really *see* it. But there are those also that no amount of persuasion can persuade. They are hardened in sin. One way in which God judges people is in giving them over to their sinfulness - in Romans 1, where Paul explains the sinfulness of humanity, three times the phrase 'God gave them up' is used - God lets people do what they want to, to sin. Part of the judgement on sin is in his letting go of the restraints - in letting the sin carry people away.

This is a hard way for Acts to finish - it's not the happy ending we necessarily wanted. To hear that some will just reject the gospel no matter how much they see or hear is difficult. But this is what we have seen throughout the book and this has only been intensified as we have seen with Paul's time in Jerusalem. There are no neutral reactions to the gospel - some are joyfully transformed and seize hold of grace, but others reject it and hold more firmly to their self-righteousness and sin.

But Paul does finish his talk to the Jews on a note of hope - many of them have rejected the gospel, but there are many gentiles who will not. There are many gentiles who have open ears, hearts receptive to the message. And thank God for that, we are here this afternoon, because this message went to the gentiles!

v30-31

30 *He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, 31 proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.*

Finally, Paul stays in Rome longer, continuing to preach and teach about the risen Lord Jesus Christ, to anyone who would listen to him. As he has since his Damascus road experience in chapter 9, he preaches with boldness. In contrast to some other places that he has been, he preaches here without hindrance.

And that's Acts. A rather abrupt ending - we're left wondering what would happen next, what will happen to Paul? Will he get to see Ceasar? What happens next?

Luke stops recording things at around 60AD ish. The story of Paul, and the church doesn't end here of course - we have some hints in the Bible about what happened, along with some evidence outside the Bible. We don't know everything for certain, but we have an idea of what happened.

From what we know, Paul indeed goes before Ceasar. At some point in his time at Rome, Paul is brought before Nero, the emperor of Rome. In Acts 27:24, God promises Paul that this will happen, so we can be confident that it did.

The early church historian Eusebius writes that Paul's martyrdom was later - he was released, and was able to resume his plan to visit Spain, as he wrote about in his letter to the Romans. Clement, writing around AD95 says that Paul preached the gospel to the 'farthest limits of the west', probably meaning Spain. At some point, Paul also visits Crete, and some other places.

Later, after some years, Paul winds up back in Rome. And he also ends up back in prison. Things in Rome have changed - in AD64, there was a hugely disastrous fire, where the city was almost burnt to the ground. An estimated 70% of the city was destroyed. The emperor, still Nero, blamed the Christians for this, which ignited the persecution against Christianity in the Roman empire, a persecution that would last for almost three centuries, until Constantine.

Nero started as a good emperor - when Paul sees him the first time, he's let go. He's regarded as being pretty competent to start with. But midway through his reign, things turned for the worse. His later reign is regarded as being a mess.

It's in the midst of this persecution that both Peter and Paul find themselves in Rome - and both are martyred there. You might remember that Peter was crucified, upside down at his request. Paul on the other hand was a Roman citizen, so he was beheaded. 2 Timothy, Paul's last letter, was written as Paul was awaiting the end.

2 Timothy 4:6-8:

6 For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. 7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. 8 Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.

Conclusion

We started Acts, hearing about the final days that the apostles had with Jesus physically before his ascension. Acts 1:6-11:

6 So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" 7 He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. 8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." 9 And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. 10 And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, 11 and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

Jesus' last words to them are a prophecy. He says they will be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. And this ever widening reach of the gospel is exactly what we've seen take place. Luke's intention I think in writing Acts was not to give a complete history of the early church, nor a blow by blow account of the major developments, but to show that Jesus' words were fulfilled, that the apostles really did go far and wide and the gospel went all over.

In relation to Jerusalem, for a first century Jew, Rome may as well have been the end of the Earth - a remote, distant place, where things are very different. Whether you think that this is what Jesus meant, or that the ends of the earth means a wider view than that, what is clear is that Jesus will come physically back to Earth again and all the world will be His. When the great comission is fulfilled and all the nations are been baptised and made disciples, Jesus will return, the King of all.

Acts ends abruptly, but Acts is not the end of the story, but the beginning. The world that was created by the coming of Christ, the world that started in the first century, with those Apostles, is the world we live in now. We've read about the beginnings of the church, but we know that there is no end.