

Will *You* Listen?

Acts 28:11–31

June 23, 2002

Paul “expounded the matter to them from morning till evening, 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, while others disbelieved. So, as they disagreed among themselves, they departed, after Paul had made one statement: ‘ . . . Let it be known to you then that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.’”

This last reading from the book of the Acts of the Apostles contains two items of good news about the good news of Jesus Christ. The first is the remarkable freedom of the gospel. The word of God is not fettered. The word of God is not bound. The word of God is not imprisoned. The word of God is free. At the end of this book, Paul is in chains. Paul is under house arrest. Paul is not free to come and go as he pleases. And yet, remarkably enough, he “welcomed all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ quite openly and unhindered.” That is, despite Paul’s circumstances, the gospel of Jesus Christ was being proclaimed. The word of God was free. The word of God is alive and active. The word of God is moving into the world.

The second item of good news for us about the good news of Jesus Christ in this reading from Acts is closely related to, and grows out of, the first. Not only is the word of God free, but also the gospel of Jesus Christ is being spread beyond the people of Israel to all the people of the world. As Paul said, “Let it be known to you then that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles.” That is how and why it has come to us. That is how and why we have heard about Jesus. That is how and why we have received the grace of God.

All of this, of course, is in fulfillment of the word of God and the plan of the gospel. At the beginning of the book of Acts, Jesus said to his disciples, “You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth” (1:8b). The early chapters tell of the witness to Israel. Then comes Paul, converted to Christianity, made an apostle, and sent to the Gentiles, the non-Israelite nations of the world. And now, at the end of the book, after three mission trips around Asia Minor and Greece, Paul has carried the gospel far from Jerusalem to the very heart of the empire, to the capital city of Rome, to the home of the emperor, to the seat of worldly power. This is a remarkable accomplishment, from a human perspective. It is not something Paul could have done on his own. He would not have had access to the persons before whom he preached. But as a prisoner, he was carried to Rome. As a prisoner, he preached before governors and a king. As a prisoner for Christ, he was free to carry the gospel of Christ into new and different places.

Thus we arrive at this strange ending of the book of Acts. Paul is still a prisoner. He is under house arrest. We are not told here of the outcome of his trial. We are not told what became of his appeal. He is just there, preaching. What does this mean? It is clear from the earlier parts of this book that Paul never expected to see the Christians in Asia Minor again, because he expected his trip to Jerusalem to end in his violent death. It is clear that Paul wanted to travel beyond Rome and to take the gospel to Spain, but there is no evidence that he ever did so. Of all the letters he wrote, from all the places where he was, there is no indication of any being written after he was in Rome. That is, there is no indication in scripture that he survived his trip to

Rome, and there is every indication that Paul himself expected his imprisonment to end in his death. The earlier findings of his innocence by authorities of the Roman Empire simply serve to move him along the chain of appeal and to heighten the irony of his demise in Rome. Early Christian writers of the first century regard him as a martyr for the Christian faith. From all of this, it appears that he was executed for the faith, as he said, for the hope of Israel, for the gospel of Christ, for his belief in the resurrection, and that he was executed by the Roman Empire, much as was his Lord, Jesus Christ. Surely the author of the book of Acts knew this. Surely he knew what happened to Paul. Why did he not include this in the book? Why did he not tell us what happened to Paul? What does he accomplish by ending the book in this way?

The first thing he accomplishes is the reassurance that the gospel of Jesus Christ does not end even with the death of his greatest apostle, Paul. The book does not end with Paul's death because, finally, the book is not about Paul. The book is about the gospel of Jesus Christ. Just as Paul was preaching it before he died, so did others take it up after he died, so that it continued to be preached then, even as it continues to be preached now. To have concluded this book with the death of Paul would have confused the point. Everyone knew it had happened. No one had to dwell on it. That was not the point of his life. He had gone on to his reward. The point of his life was his faith in God and his belief in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Those go on. His message goes on. And the point of this ending which is not an ending is that the gospel of Jesus Christ goes on, all the way to us and even beyond us.

Moreover, this ending which is not an ending allows today's last reading from the book of Acts to pose two questions directly to us. The first arises out of Paul's last words to his Jewish audience there at Rome. He quoted to them portions of the prophecy of Isaiah, chapter six, which we read earlier. Part of what this means is that Paul's ministry to the Gentiles was not an aberrant idea of his own but was in obedience to the will of God and in conformity to the word of God. As he says at the end of the quote, "Let it be known to you then that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen." That described his situation then, but there is more to it. Not all of the Jews disbelieved, because all the first disciples, and Paul himself, were Jewish. Moreover, not all of the Gentiles believed, not then and not now. So, the division is not simply between the Jews and the Gentiles. The great division of humanity is between those who do not believe in Jesus Christ and those who do believe in him. That is what Paul meant by saying, "Let it be known to you then that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen." Not all of them will listen, but among them will be those who listen to the gospel, those who hear the word of God, those who believe the good news of Jesus Christ, those who obey the will of God.

And this is where the question comes to us. The question is not whether we are Jewish or Gentile. That is easy, obvious, and irrelevant. The question is, "Will we listen?" "Will *you* listen?" "Will you listen to the gospel, will you hear the word of God, will you believe the good news of Jesus Christ, and will you obey the will of God? Will you receive the forgiveness of your sin? Will you believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ as the promise of your own? Will you accept the calling of Jesus Christ to be his follower? Will you love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength? When Paul says to the Jews, of the Gentiles, "They will listen," it is not simply a history lesson for us. It is a living, vital question for us: "Will we listen to the gospel, or not?" There is no more important question in your life.

This first question leads to the second one: If Paul can preach the gospel while he is under arrest, are we going to preach it while we are free? Are we going to bear witness to Jesus Christ? Are we going to speak a good word for Jesus Christ? Are we going to invite people into the church, into the worshiping community of the people of Christ? Are we going to go into the streets, into the highways and byways, telling people the good news? Are we going to provide for the calling, education, and support of preachers of the gospel? Are we going to send missionaries around the world, to the rest of the nations of the world? Paul preached the gospel while he was in prison; what are we going to do?

This is the reason the book of the Acts of the Apostles ends with an ending that is not an ending: the gospel has no ending. The gospel is forever, and it is open-ended. As such, it raises questions which demand answers from us. "Let it be known to you then that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen." Will we listen? And if so, Will we preach?

To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.

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