

O Church Arise: Through the Book of Acts

To the Ends of the Earth (Acts 21-28)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on August 2, 2015

Introduction

- ❖ This morning we're concluding our series through the book of Acts. Because we had some calendar conflicts among us preachers, we had to switch things up. So last Sunday, we already began our next series called *Heroes of the Faith*. But don't worry, we weren't planning to move on without finishing the last eight chapters of Acts. That's what I'm here to do today. And next week we'll have the privilege of hearing a guest preacher from Hope Church Houston who will continue our *Heroes* series.
 - ▶ So yes today I plan on covering eight chapters, chapters 21-28. Hopefully we'll be done by lunchtime. Kidding. As we've been doing through this series, but even more so today, I'll just do a flyover of these chapters.

- ❖ But I do encourage you to read through them yourself sometime this week. If you've never done it, I think you'll be struck by the amount of detail Luke offers in his narration of events. Nowhere else in the book does he give such a blow-by-blow account, listing city after city, port after port. It kind of reads like a diary. And in a sense it was one. Chapter 21 and on reads from a first person plural perspective. We set sail. We stayed there. We went up to Jerusalem. Luke was one of Paul's traveling companions. No wonder it's so detailed. Luke was there for it all.

- ❖ But I think there's another explanation for dedicating eight chapters to record just one of many incidents in Paul's life. **Remember, Luke is not just writing as a personal secretary or historian. He's writing as a theologian.** He has a theological point he's trying to get across, and I think it's easier to see it when you compare this book to his Gospel account. In both Luke spends an inordinate amount of space recording the details events of a journey towards Jerusalem, filled with warnings of suffering to come, of an unjust arrest and subsequent trials, and of angry mobs crying for blood.

- ❖ **I think there's a definite comparison being made between Paul and Christ Jesus.** Of course, Paul's trials and sufferings were in no way redemptive. He didn't suffer vicariously in the place of sinners. That's unique to Jesus. But just consider the similarities with me.
 - ▶ Both Jesus and Paul were rejected by their own people. Both were unjustly accused and arrested. Both were misrepresented by false witnesses. Both were slapped in the face while on trial. Both were victims of secret plots by Jewish leaders. Both heard mobs crying, "*Away with him.*" (Acts 21:36; Lk. 23:18)

- ❖ Both were subjected to a series of five trials. Jesus faced the high priest (Lk.22:54), the Sanhedrin (22:66), Herod Antipas (23:7), and Pilate twice (Acts 23:1, 11). Paul faced the mob in the temple courts (22:1), the Sanhedrin (23:1), Felix (24:1), Festus (25:1), and Herod Agrippa II (26:1).
 - ▶ And both men were exonerated by Roman authorities. Three times Pilate says Jesus is blameless (Lk. 23:4; 23:14-15; 23:22), and three times Paul is said to have done nothing wrong (Acts 23:9; 25:25; 26:31-32). **The similarities are striking, especially if you read Luke's Gospel and Acts together as one book (which was how it was meant to be read).** *So what's the theological significance of this comparison?*

- ❖ I think the significance is this: The book of Acts is about the Church, right? About disciples, about Christ followers. **Then to follow Christ means to follow him in his sufferings.** *Why does this book about the Church's gospel mission end with a detailed account of trial and suffering?* Because that's where our mission is taking us.
 - ▶ **You don't become a Christian because it means your life is going to be easier.** To be safe and comfortable. If that's what you were told, you've been sold a bill of goods. You've been given a false hope. **Scripture says the call to follow Christ is to call to die, a call to pick up your own cross** (Lk. 9:23). That's what Paul was doing. He was walking in his Master's footsteps. And his trials and suffering are paradigmatic for any Christian who follows in the same footsteps on the same mission for the same gospel.

- ❖ **Have you ever noticed how the book of Acts ends without a firm conclusion?** Paul makes it to Rome. It's a strategic position to advance the mission. Rome is the center of the known world. But it's not the *end* of the known world.
 - ▶ Remember, Jesus said in chapter 1:8 that the Church will be his witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. So the mission is not done. **The way in which Luke wraps up the book is really giving us readers an implicit challenge and invitation to pick up where the story left off and finish the mission of taking the gospel to the ends of the earth.**
 - What I want to stress this morning is that this mission won't be nice and cozy. It won't be easy and convenient. I've got three points making that one point.

No Guarantee of a Safe and Comfortable Life

- ❖ The first thing I want to demonstrate from these chapters is that **Jesus doesn't send us on mission to the ends of the earth with the guarantee of a safe and comfortable life.** Let's just come to grips with that. **A lot of people view becoming a Christian as a solution to the trouble in their lives.** Isn't that what it means to have God on your side? Sadly there are preachers and teachers who teach this and hold out false promises that God never made.

- ❖ In Luke's Gospel, Jesus says that if you're my friend, one of my sheep, then you have no need to fear. No need to be anxious. But not because being a part of his flock guarantees you'll enjoy a life of safety and security, of comfort and ease. **No, you might actually be killed for being his friend.** Listen to Jesus in **Luke 12**, *"I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do. ⁵But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him! . . . ³²Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."*

- ❖ **The guarantee God gives his sheep is the guarantee that hell is no longer in your future.** You deserve hell, but your Good Shepherd endured it for you. Because of Jesus, it's now your heavenly Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom instead of hell.
 - ▶ As a Christian, you can bank on that. No matter what the world throws at you. Even if you're killed for your faith, Jesus' point is that they're only killing your body. A body which God promises to raise one day just as he raised his Son.

- ❖ The point here is that being a Christian, where you're living a life on mission for God, is no cake walk. **You're being deployed into battle – into the good fight – where there's inherent risk and danger.** Just look at Paul starting in chapter 21. During his third missionary journey, he travelled through Asia Minor and Greece, visiting churches and collecting an offering from the Gentile churches to relieve the suffering of Judaeen churches (Acts 24:16; Rom. 15:25). That's why Paul was determined to reach Jerusalem to bring aid (Acts 20:16, 22).
 - ▶ But on two different occasions, his friends urge him not to go. In 21:4, disciples at Tyre were telling him not to go to Jerusalem because the Spirit had revealed to them Paul's impending fate. And then when they get to Caesarea in v10, a prophet named Agabus shows up with a message for Paul. He takes Paul's belt and binds his own hands and feet saying, *"Thus says the Holy Spirit, 'This is how the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.'"* (21:11)
- ❖ Naturally, his friends try to persuade him to turn back. "Paul, why are you going? Do you have a death wish or something? You know the unjust persecution that awaits you. Why are you walking straight into it?"
 - ▶ But Paul has no death wish. He doesn't have a romanticized picture of martyrdom. He replies in v13, *"What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus."*
- ❖ **Paul was not fooled by false hope or expectation that he was somehow invincible just because he was an apostle.** He knew he might be imprisoned or even killed for his faith. But they can only kill the body and after that have nothing more than can do to me. God is on my side. My future is secured. He's promised me the kingdom. That's why I'm ready to go to Jerusalem. Paul's thinking I'm going to die some day anyways. **If it's my time to go, then I want to go out while I'm living a life on mission for God in obedience to his gospel.**
- ❖ That reminds me an exchange I read between a missionary **John Paton** and a respected elder who tried to dissuade Paton from his youthful exuberance and desire to bring the gospel to a cannibalistic tribe in the South Pacific. Paton was a 19th-century Scottish missionary who sailed with his young wife and newborn son to the New Hebrides islands. Twenty years prior, two London missionaries were killed and eaten by the island natives only minutes after stepping foot ashore. That dissuaded any other attempts for nearly two decades. Until John Paton got it in his head that someone needs to try again.
 - ▶ A certain Mr. Dickson tried to speak some sense into the young man. "The cannibals," he reminded Paton, "You will be eaten by cannibals!" To that Paton replied, "Mr. Dickson, you are advanced in years now, and your own prospect is soon to be laid in the grave, there to be eaten by worms; **I confess to you, that if I can but live and die serving and honoring the Lord Jesus, it will make no difference to me whether I am eaten by Cannibals or by worms.**"¹

¹ quoted from John Piper's *Filling Up the Afflictions of Christ*, pg. 58.

- ❖ Paton got it. Paul got it. They understood that there's no guarantee in this life of safety and comfort. If you have it, then treat it as a merciful gift from God to be received with gratitude and not as a supposed right to be demanded or expected.
 - ▶ **We're all going to die someday. You can't change that. But you can change how you live.** Whether your life decisions are governed by a motive of self-preservation or by a passion for Christ and for seeing his gospel reach the ends of the earth, so that self-giving and self-sacrifice become the defining characteristics of your life and ministry.
- ❖ *What's keeping you from going to the hard-to-reach places across town and across the globe?* To the places where they're not likely to welcome you and your Jesus with open arms but with hostility and hate, perhaps even spears and guns.
 - ▶ I know what it is because I feel it too. Our earthly lives are too valuable and precious to us. We don't think or feel like Paul who said, *"I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God."* (Acts 20:24)

No Safe and Comfortable Message

- ❖ If we want that kind of courage, that kind of resolve, then we need to seriously consider the message Paul preached. This leads to our second point: **Jesus doesn't send us on mission to the ends of the earth to preach a safe and comfortable message.**
 - ▶ The reason why Paul never seemed to enjoy the luxury of safety and comfort is because he was constantly preaching, wherever God sent him, an unsafe and uncomfortable message. We get a good grasp of it as we flyover the events surrounding his five trials.
 - The first defense he gives is to a crowd of Jews at the temple in Jerusalem. He was attacked by an unruly mob but spared because of the quick action of a Roman tribune.
- ❖ As he was being pulled to safety, Paul asks permission to address the crowd, and he centers his speech on the Damascus road encounter with the Risen Jesus and how it transformed him from a zealous persecutor of the Way into a zealous member of the Way (22:1-21). But no one's impressed. Instead they get angrier.
 - ▶ The Roman officials lock Paul up for his own safety and to get to the bottom of this. The next day they bring Paul to the Sanhedrin, the Jewish high council. This second speech is contained in chapter 23. And here Paul appeals directly to the resurrection. Look at v6, *"Now when Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, "Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. It is with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial.""*
- ❖ The mention of resurrection causes an uproar. Paul knows it's a point of contention between the two parties within the Council. The Sadducees deny the reality of a resurrection while Pharisees teach it (23:8). But Paul's not just trying to turn them against each other. **The resurrection is truly at the center of his message and the center of all this controversy.**

- ❖ Now it's not necessarily Jesus' resurrection that he's talking about. It certainly relates, but the resurrection of the dead is what Paul describes later as "*the hope of Israel*" (26:6; 28:20). **He's talking about the belief that Jews had of a future resurrection of both the just and the unjust** (24:15). A final day of judgment where everyone who ever lived will be raised in the body to stand before God to give an account for how they lived in the body (1 Cor. 15:12; Heb. 9:27). And the "hope of Israel" was to be declared righteous on that day. To be found in right standing before the Holy Judge.

- ❖ But if you don't have that hope, the prospect of a future resurrection where you'll be reunited with your body to be judged for everything you've ever done in the body is a discomfoting thought. **You can see why people get offended at this idea and try to shoot the messenger.**
 - ▶ You see this discomfort later on in chapter 24. After a plot against his life is discovered, Paul is transported by cover of night to Caesarea and played under the authority of Felix the governor of Judea. His wife is Drusilla the sister of Herod Agrippa II (who appears in chapter 25). She's known for her ravishing beauty and was seduced away from her husband by Felix. And she was his third wife. Keep all that in mind.
 - We read in 24:24, "²⁴*After some days Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish, and he sent for Paul and heard him speak about faith in Christ Jesus. ²⁵And as he reasoned about righteousness and self-control and the coming judgment, Felix was alarmed and said, "Go away for the present."*"

- ❖ Paul's discourse was greatly discomfoting to Felix. It says he was alarmed. Paul's preaching about righteousness and self-control, which are the very things he and his wife lacked since it was unbridled lust that brought them together. And talk of coming judgment (related to talk of resurrection) would've been hard for Felix to hear considering all the immorality in his life.
 - ▶ **You can see why a message about a coming resurrection for everyone and a coming judgment is not popular.** It's not safe and comfortable. Telling people that they're responsible for all their actions and will be held accountable to a standard not their own – a standard they inevitably fall short of – will not be well received.

- ❖ **But of course our message about a future resurrection of all men should always be preached in conjunction with a message about the past resurrection of one man named Christ Jesus.** The gospel doesn't say: Trust in Jesus and he'll rescue you from death. No, that's not quite right. Jesus never promised rescue you from death but from staying dead.
 - ▶ Everyone is going to die. **But because Jesus didn't stay dead, if your hope is in him then you have the hope of sharing in his resurrection.** You won't stay dead. You'll rise to eternal life and not eternal punishment (Jn. 5:29; Mt. 25:46).

- ❖ *Do you share in this hope? Does the thought of a future resurrection in the body where you'll face a holy and righteous God – does it feel hopeful or alarming? Does it comfort you or disturb you? It really depends whether, on that day, you're standing alone in your resurrected body or you're standing in Christ sharing in his resurrection life and victory.* If you want to stand in Christ then cry out to him today and he will surely save.

Promises to Relieve Our Fears

- ❖ So let's recap. Jesus doesn't send us on mission to the ends of the earth with the guarantee of a safe and comfortable life or with a safe and comfortable message to share. But, here's our third point, he doesn't send us out without sure promises to relieve our fears for safety and comfort.
- ❖ *How do you explain Paul's courage?* To what do you attribute his determination and resolve throughout this entire odyssey – as he headed towards sure persecution in Jerusalem, as he endure beatings, unjust trials, and a doomed voyage across the sea? What kept him going?
 - ▶ As much as we'd like to think that he was just cut from a different cloth, that he was especially equipped with the right personality for the task – **the reality is that Paul's hope, Paul's resolve, Paul's courage rested in something available to us all. He rested in the promises of God.**
- ❖ In the middle of chapter 23, right after Paul triggered a violent disagreement between the Sadducees and Pharisees within the high council, it says the tribute was afraid Paul would be torn to pieces, so he whisked him away into the barracks. We're told in v11 that "*The following night the Lord stood by him and said, "Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome."*" So God made a promise Paul. He says to take courage in the face of these trials because you can be sure you won't die here in Jerusalem. You still need to testify about me in Rome.
 - ▶ And again in chapter 27, while lost at sea for two weeks, when everyone had abandoned all hope of being saved (v20), Paul stood among the downcast and told them, "*22Yet now I urge you to take heart, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. 23For this very night there stood before me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship, 24and he said, 'Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar. And behold, God has granted you all those who sail with you.'* 25*So take heart, men, for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told.*"
- ❖ God made promises. And Paul had faith in God. Which is why he took heart, why he took courage in the face of serious danger and threat to his life. God still had a job for him to do (cf. Phil. 1:24-26). **Until he reached Rome, until he stood before Caesar himself and testified to the Risen Christ, Paul knew he was literally invincible.** God has work for me and he'll see to it that it gets done.
 - ▶ That reminds me of something else I read from John Paton. In one of his journals, as he recounted an especially frightening attack by the cannibalistic natives, he wrote, "*My heart rose up to the Lord Jesus; I saw Him watching all the scene. My peace came back to me like a wave from God. I realized that I was immortal till my Master's work with me was done. The assurance came to me . . . that not a musket would be fired to wound us, not a club prevail to strike us, not a spear leave the hand in which it was held vibrating to be thrown, not an arrow leave the bow, or a killing stone the fingers, without the permission of Jesus Christ.*"²

² Ibid., 58.

- ❖ Now don't misinterpret this: Paton never said he received an angelic message assuring him of work yet to be done (like Paul did). **Throughout his trials, he simply trusted in the goodness and faithfulness of God to do what is right and to keep his promises.** If a cannibal's spear were to finally hit its intended target and he were to die on the field, it would be because Jesus permitted such to occur. And it would mean that Paton's earthly ministry was done.
 - ▶ So that means you don't have to wait around until you get some sort of angelic message before you can have the faith and confidence to go to the hard places with a message that's hard for people to accept. **Our point is that you can leave the safety and comfort of your own Jerusalem and go the ends of the earth on mission with God knowing, with full assurance, that your Master will protect you and preserve you until your work here on earth is done.**
 - There is no such thing as a stray bullet, a random act of violence, a chance sickness, or a senseless tragedy. Many missionaries since Acts 28 have lost their lives on the field. But it's not for a lack of faith in God's promises.

- ❖ Let me leave you with one more story. Maybe you've heard of **Martin and Gracia Burnham**, a missionary couple to the Philippines, kidnapped in back 2001 and held hostage by radical Muslim terrorists.³ Their captivity lasted for 376 days and grabbed global attention, especially in the wake of 9/11.
 - ▶ Their ordeal ended with a botched rescue attempt by the Philippine military. Gracia was badly wounded but rescued. Martin however was shot and killed in the chest. The Lord's work for Martin Burnham on this earth was done that day in the jungle. But not for Gracia. He spared her because there was something else she had to do.
 - Upon returning home she shared her story through various channels and testified to God's grace, which enabled her to forgive her captors. As years passed she learned that some of those interviews reached her very captors and to date she's aware of four who have come to know the Lord.

- ❖ I wanted to end with Gracia's story because I believe one of the works for which the Lord spared her to accomplish is to bless us this winter with her story. Gracia is one of the speakers for the **Chinese Mission Convention** taking place here in town over New Years. CMC is the largest gathering of North American Chinese churches aimed at unleashing the whole church – Chinese and English congregations; families and singles; adults, youth, children – to be on mission for God's global glory. We're one of the host churches along with our sister churches in town, and we're inviting everyone to join us. I'm excited for the speaker line up, for the Tim Be Told New Year's Eve concert, and for the chance to learn together and be challenged together as a church.
 - ▶ I've been praying for God to send, from this church, families, couples, singles – to send even you – into the global harvest field. My hope is that God takes an experience like CMC and couples it with the weekly preaching of the Word to spark something in you and perhaps raise you up to go to the ends of the earth.

³ See: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2002/juneweb-only/6-10-51.0.html?share=pz9FQs6beoHWPI%2f4FVb31E%2ff3Eq0FnX>