

Lesson 34: Acts 28:7-31 The Kingdom of God

Introduction

The book of Acts opened with a question about God's kingdom. The book of Acts closes with the preaching of God's Kingdom. Throughout we have used the language of Acts speaking about the spread of the Gospel or the spread of the Church from Jerusalem, to Judea and Samaria, to the outer ends of the Earth. The Gospel spreads by the power of the Holy Spirit through human witness.

The Kingdom of God language is not primary to Luke's narration. It does not appear in any of the other speeches given by Peter, or Stephen, or Paul. Luke emphasizes the more personal or individual language used by Christian leaders in evangelism - the language of repentance, belief in Jesus, forgiveness, and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Still, reference to the Kingdom occurs six times as a consistent summary of the Gospel message. Philip preached the Kingdom of God to the Samaritans. Paul strengthened the new disciples of his first missionary journey with reference to the Kingdom of God. Paul also referred to the Kingdom of God both in the synagogue of Ephesus and when he was speaking to the Ephesian elders.

Kingdom of God language occurs much more in the synoptic Gospels - Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Jesus spoke of the Kingdom as an already and not yet reality. In Luke 17:20, he says, "The kingdom of God is in your midst." Another possible translation would be, "The Kingdom of God is within you." That is the "already." The Kingdom of God IS in your midst. Jesus also taught His disciples to pray for the Kingdom to come, "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." That's the "not yet." Well, that prayer encapsulates two ideas. The Kingdom of God is present when the people of God yield to Him as King. When we do the will of God on Earth as it is done in Heaven, we are a spiritual extension of God's Kingdom. The prayer also looks ahead to the physical reign of God on Earth described in Revelation, where His enemies are vanquished and His subjects live in His will, in the light of His presence. On Earth as in Heaven.

The Kingdom of God is a major motif running through the Bible that brings together several significant theological themes. When I teach about the Kingdom of God, I emphasize six themes that make up kingdom. Just think about it. What do you need to have kingdom? What is absolutely necessary? What do you have to have, to have a kingdom? The two essential elements are a King and a People. Without those there's no even concept of kingdom. Four more themes are present in the Biblical understanding of kingdom: a covenant, a covenant mediator, a land, and a palace or a temple.

And we can follow each of those elements of kingdom through Scripture as a major theological theme: the Covenant as a theme; or Temple as a theme; the mediators of Covenant as a theme. Each of these aspects of Kingdom takes on a new or fulfilled aspect after the coming of Jesus Christ. The King is Jesus, who reigns from Heaven. The King's will is now expressed through the New Covenant, which explains both how we are able to be in relationship with God, and how we live as citizens of the Kingdom. Whereas the servant Moses was the mediator of the Old Covenant, the Son Himself came to mediate the New. Our land is no longer the geo-political land of Israel. Our land is currently spiritual, and this is one of the major aspects of the "already, not yet." We are citizens of a Heavenly Kingdom, and we already live in that Kingdom in the spiritual sense. But our land is going to become physical when God renews Heaven and Earth. The Temple, the place God dwells, is no longer a physical building, but is now with individual believers. God indwells you and the community of believers. God indwells the Church. We are the place God reveals His presence. And the people of the Kingdom are no longer centered around and defined by the land Israel and the Temple within that land. The New Covenant people of God are centered around and defined by belief in Jesus. It is everybody in every land who believes in Jesus. And that is a huge difference.

We refer to all of these realities when we use the phrase, “Kingdom of God.” It’s a motif that covers a lot of theological ideas, or realities. To simplify, we can think primarily of the reign of God expressed through those who have entered His Kingdom by faith in Jesus. “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” So, thinking mainly of King, and People, and that King’s right authority, and our loving obedience. We will talk more about the Kingdom when we come to each reference in our concluding text of Acts.

From a literary point of view, our final movement of Acts part VI balances the first movement of Acts part VI. All three defenses given in the middle movements occurred in the context of trial and investigation made by Roman officials. Paul is on trial. The defense given in our first movement consisted of the miracle of raising a dead boy, followed by words to the Ephesian elders. Here in the last movement the defense parallels that pattern with the miracle of healing a sick man, followed by words to the Jewish elders of Rome.

This whole movement that began with shipwreck and is going to end in Rome provides a conclusion to the book of Acts. The danger avoided gave us a climax. Paul was rescued during that climax and given a promise that he must stand before Caesar. The misconception corrected on the island of Malta and the defense given of miracle and words to Jewish elders in Rome provide falling action and resolution. The falling action after the climatic shipwreck are the miracles on Malta and the concluding stages of the journey to Rome. We are going to finally get to Rome. The action is winding down. Though, once we get to Rome we will have to ask, “Exactly how does the end of Acts provide resolution?”, because it really feels like it leaves Paul’s fate hanging. We don’t know what happens. So, does it provide resolution and if so, how?

I’ll address the defense given in three parts: the miracle of healing; the journey from Malta to Rome; and Paul’s concluding speech to the Jews. Here is the miracle in Acts 28:7-31.

Defense Given (7-31)

Defense Through Miracle (7-10)

⁷ Now in the neighborhood of that place were lands belonging to the leading man of the island, named Publius, who welcomed us and entertained us courteously three days. ⁸ And it happened that the father of Publius was lying *in bed* afflicted with *recurrent* fever and dysentery; and Paul went in *to see* him and after he had prayed, he laid his hands on him and healed him. ⁹ After this had happened, the rest of the people on the island who had diseases were coming to him and getting cured. ¹⁰ They also honored us with many marks of respect; and when we were setting sail, they supplied *us* with all we needed.

Luke gives us one specific miracle of healing as a representation of many miracles God performed through Paul on Malta. The power of the miracles again affirms Paul as God’s messenger. It’s part of the defense. Why would God continue to do all these great healings through Paul if Paul is a criminal? The story also works for Luke as he begins to wrap up his narrative. Paul began his first missionary journey on the island of Cyprus where he was eventually brought before the Roman governor. There, Paul spoke, a false magician was blinded, and the governor believed. Here, Paul is eventually brought before the head man of the island, he heals the man’s father, and he is favored.

The balance created here is a mark of Luke’s style as a historian. We have seen throughout how he recognizes connections and parallels in historical events, and then he arranges his narrative in a historically accurate and artistic way. The story of Paul began as he journeyed from Antioch to the island of Cyprus. The story of Paul ends as he moves from the island of Malta to Rome.

Completion of the Journey to Rome (11-16)

The journey continues in Acts 28:11-16.

¹¹ At the end of three months we set sail on an Alexandrian ship which had wintered at the island, and which had the Twin Brothers for its figurehead. ¹² After we put in at Syracuse, we stayed there for three days. ¹³ From there we sailed around and arrived at Rhegium, and a day

later a south wind sprang up, and on the second day we came to Puteoli.¹⁴ There we found *some* brethren, and were invited to stay with them for seven days; and thus we came to Rome.¹⁵ And the brethren, when they heard about us, came from there as far as the Market of Appius and Three Inns to meet us; and when Paul saw them, he thanked God and took courage.¹⁶ When we entered Rome, Paul was allowed to stay by himself, with the soldier who was guarding him.

The dangerous sailing period ended at the beginning of February. Ships wintered three to four months. I thought the Twin Brothers would be Romulus and Remus, founders of Rome, and wondered why they would be on a ship based in Alexandria, Egypt. Bruce corrected me. The twins are the Castor and Pollux of Greek mythology, the Gemini, patrons for sailors.

Syracuse is on the southeastern corner of Sicily, the large island that looks like a ball being kicked by the boot of Italy. It makes sense as a port of call for ships traveling from Malta, as does Rhegium, situated right on the toe of Italy's boot. Puteoli is two days further up the coast in the same bay as Naples and Pompeii. Puteoli is not a name widely known now, but at one time it was a major Roman port where ships from around the Empire would dock to unload wares that continued to Rome by land. Since the time of Claudius grain ships would continue further, putting in at a new port closer to Rome, but passengers would still disembark at Puteoli.

Josephus claims the Jewish community in Puteoli was the second oldest in Italy, second only to Rome. So, though we may have not heard of Puteoli, it's not surprising Paul found a Christian fellowship in this important port city. Close to Puteoli the travelers would have encountered the famous Roman road called, the Appian Way. Following the Appian Way, they would come first to Three Taverns, that's about 33 miles (53 kilometers) from Rome, and then the Market of Appius just 10 miles or 16 kilometers from Rome. Believers from Rome came and met Paul's group at both places. Apparently, the week-long stay in Puteoli allowed news of their arrival to precede them to Rome. Luke tells us Paul was greatly encouraged by the show of Christian fellowship.

Later in verse 30, we will be told that Paul stayed in rented quarters. So, the house he is staying in was probably provided by a wealthy patron in Rome. Paul continued to be under a light form of arrest watched over by a single soldier. He would be chained to that soldier by the wrist with a chain that allowed room for movement. Soldiers would rotate every four hours. Imagine how many soldiers heard the Good News of Jesus Christ, either in direct conversation with Paul, or by listening in on his conversations with others! The description provided here at the end of Acts of Paul chained to a soldier meeting with visitors fits a comment he is going to make later in Philippians 1:13 where he writes, "my imprisonment... has become well known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to everyone else." The praetorian guard is Caesar's legion, Caesar's guard. And all these soldiers are rotating through, listening to Paul for two years as he is continually witnessing and teaching everybody that comes to see him.

Defense Through Paul's Words to the Jewish Elders (17-29)

We now come to Paul's seventh and last speech in the book of Acts. He is speaking to the Jewish leaders of Rome. Luke does not really give us his speech. He gives us two summaries and a rebuke. First, Paul summarizes his treatment over the last two years. Then Luke summarizes Paul's teaching to the Jewish leaders. And the text ends with Paul rebuking them.

The summary of Paul's treatment by Jews and Romans over the past two years is in 28:17-22.

¹⁷ After three days Paul called together those who were the leading men of the Jews, and when they came together, he *began* saying to them, "Brethren, 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.¹⁸ "And when they had examined me, they were willing to release me because there was no ground for putting me to death.¹⁹ "But when the Jews objected, I was forced to appeal to Caesar, not that I had any accusation against my nation.²⁰ "For this reason, therefore, I requested to see you and to speak with you, for I am

wearing this chain for the sake of the hope of Israel.”²¹ They said to him, “We have neither received letters from Judea concerning you, nor have any of the brethren come here and reported or spoken anything bad about you.”²² “But we desire to hear from you what your views are; for concerning this sect, it is known to us that it is spoken against everywhere.”

Paul does not shy away from engaging the Jewish leaders in Rome. He has felt an obligation to preach first to the children of Israel everywhere he’s gone, in every city. He doesn’t change that now. He invites Jewish leaders to come to him, since he cannot go to them this time. The group that comes is likely composed of leaders from many synagogues that are scattered throughout Rome.

Paul is forthright about his treatment by the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem. He does not smooth out the seriousness of the rejection he experienced. Though he does tell the story carefully, recognizing potential concerns of this particular audience.

“Brethren, 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.

Paul claims not to have acted against “the customs of our fathers.” That is a debatable point from the Jewish perspective. Paul has proclaimed freedom from Old Covenant law for both Jew and Gentile. These Jewish leaders would be aware of Jews in Rome who, at the very least, began associating with unclean Gentiles after belief in Jesus.

Paul is able to make the claim that he has not acted against “the customs of our fathers” because of the care he took in limiting his own personal freedom in the grace of Jesus Christ, particularly when he was in Israel. He did not have to follow food laws, or make sacrifice, or go through ritual purity. But in order not to set up a needless stumbling block, he did follow those laws when among Jews. As he wrote in 1 Corinthians 9:20, “To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might win Jews.”

Paul provides an important example for Christians of all times in all places in his strong commitment to the principles of freedom in grace, combined with his personal choice to restrict his own liberty out of love for other people. Paul’s choice to restrict his liberty has enabled him to remove one of the barriers that might immediately shut down his witness to these Jewish leaders. He wants them to know that he is not preaching against their customs.

Paul also attempts to counter the emotional barrier of fear that these Jewish leaders might be feeling as they learn a famous Jewish Rabbi converted to Christianity is set to be judged before Caesar. What is he going to say? What trouble might he cause for the Jews in Rome? Only ten years have passed since Claudius expelled Jews from Rome, and that may have been motivated by disturbances over Jesus who Suetonius called, “a certain Chrestus.” Claudius’ expulsion was probably ended when he died five years later, and Nero became emperor. So, they have only been back in Rome for five years. With that major upheaval still very much impressed on the Jewish community of Rome, we can expect that they would be very nervous about what the Jewish Christian Paul might say to Caesar.

Paul’s words seemed designed to allay that fear. He insists he is innocent. But he does not bear any grudge against his own people. He says that specifically, “I was forced to appeal to Caesar, not that I had any accusation against my own nation.” He does not plan to accuse or defame the Jews of Rome. In fact, he says, “I am on trial for the hope of Israel.” That will be his message to Caesar.

He does not get into the unfair treatment that he experienced in Jerusalem. He does not go into the mob riot. He simply says he was delivered into the hands of the Romans. He makes the point Luke has been making through these chapters, “when they had examined me, they were willing to release me because there was no ground for putting me to death.”

Not mentioning the mob, Paul also does not mention the planned ambushes. He is not getting into the behind-the-scenes motives and schemes. He simply says, “But when the Jews objected, I was forced to appeal to Caesar, not that I had any accusation against my nation.” Paul’s argument is with the governing establishment of Israel and against the religious leaders who have rejected Jesus Christ. He loves the Jewish people. He wrote to the Roman believers,

“I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart, for I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh (Romans 9:2-3).”

He loves his people. He does not want to accuse the nation. In fact, he claims to wear his current chain of imprisonment “for the sake of the hope of Israel.” That chain is a reference to the chain attaching him to the Roman guard, who is listening to the whole conversation. “The hope of Israel” is a phrase we have already encountered. It is the hope of all the promises of the Old Testament coming true in a new Heaven and a new Earth with a new Jerusalem. Paul claims that the fulfillment of all the promises depends upon the death and resurrection of the person, of the Messiah, who is Jesus Christ.

That’s Paul’s summary of the events that have brought him to this point. “I have done nothing against the Jewish people. I was unjustly imprisoned. My only option was to appeal to Caesar. I am arguing for the hope of Israel.”

²¹ They said to him, “We have neither received letters from Judea concerning you, nor have any of the brethren come here and reported or spoken anything bad about you.

That does not mean they are positively inclined to Paul.

²² “But we desire to hear from you what your views are; for concerning this sect, it is known to us that it is spoken against everywhere.”

There must be enmity between the synagogues of Rome and the Jews who have stolen away the Gentile God-fearers of Rome and set up a rival community. That community has become even more Gentile in nature since the expulsion of Claudius, when strong Jewish Christian leaders like Aquilla and Priscilla were forced from Rome. That affected both synagogue and church. Over the past ten years, we can imagine a separation between church and synagogue in Rome, so that these Jewish leaders speak of the Christian movement as something quite separate or other. And they would like to hear Paul’s views. They have already heard the views of less distinguished Jewish Christians who were from Rome, then came to Jerusalem and came back but they would like to hear this Rabbi’s views.

“Spoken against everywhere” is rather strong, and we need to remember who is saying that. The Jewish communities everywhere Paul has gone have split between those who believe in Jesus Christ and those who reject Jesus Christ. We have not encountered an example where a whole synagogue believed and became a Messianic fellowship. It is always the Christians leaving. The record of Acts shows a consistent pattern of believers in Jesus being pushed out of the synagogue or choosing to leave because of animosity against their faith.

So we can assume that those who remain in the synagogue, holding onto a Judaism separated from fulfillment in Jesus, speak badly of the Christian movement. So, when these Jewish leaders say, “concerning this sect, it is known to us that it is spoken against everywhere,” they are not speaking for everybody in the Roman Empire and the Persian Empire. They are speaking of the reports they have gotten from Jewish synagogues that have split over the issue of Jesus.

Okay, so Paul has summarized the past two years. Luke is now going to summarize for us Paul’s conversations with these Roman Jews. This is Acts 28:23-24.

²³ When they had set a day for Paul, they came to him at his lodging in large numbers; and he was explaining to them by solemnly testifying about the kingdom of God and trying to persuade them concerning Jesus, from both the Law of Moses and from the Prophets, from morning until evening. ²⁴ Some were being persuaded by the things spoken, but others would not believe.

This summary is representative of the Gospel message that has been preached throughout Acts. There are three phrases here: first, “testifying about the kingdom of God;” second, “trying to persuade them concerning Jesus;” third, “from both the Law of Moses and from the Prophets.”

As with the book of Acts, the concept of the “Kingdom of God” underlies Paul’s theology in his letters, but it is not language that he often uses. The phrase just pops up. Paul speaks several times

of inheriting the Kingdom of God. In that sense he is looking forward to the “not yet”, to the second coming of Jesus Christ. He does say write in Colossians 1:13 that God has “rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son.” That speaks to the already present spiritual reality of the Kingdom. Everyone who has yielded to Christ as King has been transferred into His Kingdom. Paul also wrote in Romans 14:17, “the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.” In the “already” Kingdom we are talking about the transformation of the Spirit in our lives. When we live according to the will of God in the power of the Holy Spirit, we are displaying the values of the Kingdom.

Paul’s preaching about the Kingdom, and we can only imagine how much he got into, but what we know is that it is tightly connected to persuading them about Jesus. “Christ” means, “Anointed One.” It means “Son of David,” it means, “the King.” So, the Kingdom of God is a Kingdom under Jesus Christ. Preaching that Jesus is the Christ led to accusations that Paul envisioned a political movement. The Thessalonians brought a charge of sedition against Paul arguing that following Christ constituted a challenge to Caesar’s rule. “[These Christians] all act contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.” We have argued through Acts, based on Jesus’ own words to Pilate, that the early Christian teachers understood the Kingdom of Christ to be spiritually defined, not politically defined. They did not seek to set up Christian kingdoms on earth. They sought to establish spiritual assemblies or bodies of Christ in all kingdoms on earth. And that is important for us to recognize. If what is our mission as the Church is our mission to set up a Christian Kingdom, it is not necessarily a bad thing, but is that our mission? The mission of the Church in Acts is the same as the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20; we are to go and make disciples or in Acts, that we are to be the witnesses for Christ from Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria, to the outer ends of the Earth; and that is both the geographical move “out”, and it’s a ethnic or cultural move “out” - to go to all peoples. That is the Kingdom of God that is being set up in the “now,” before the second coming of Christ, is that we bring people into spiritual relationship with God. And we do as Paul did. we try to establish “ekklesia,” assemblies, communities of believers in Jesus Christ, whose lives will be transformative in their families and in their communities. Through them, the Gospel will go out into their city and beyond their city.

So, Paul was talking about the Kingdom of God to these Jewish leaders. He was persuading them about Jesus Christ, who was the King of that Kingdom. And there is a final phrase here, that he was persuading “them from both the Law of Moses and from the Prophets.” The Old Testament is a great starting point with the Jews. We can see why he would start there with them, but it is not only that. This is how the book of Acts began, with Jesus revealing Himself from the Old Testament Scriptures to His disciples. This is the background and context of their witness, that they give witness to Christ grounded in the teaching of the Scriptures. Full understanding of the New Covenant comes from an understanding of the Old. It is not difficult to show that in all of Paul’s letters he is quoting and referencing Old Covenant. Since we are in Rome, I’ll use the letter of Romans as a quick example. That letter begins and ends by establishing the Gospel’s connection to the Old Covenant. So, in the beginning, Romans 1:1-2,

¹ Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, ² which He promised beforehand through His prophets in the holy Scriptures...

A reference to the Prophets, then at the end of Romans 16:25-26,

²⁵ Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which has been kept secret for long ages past, ²⁶ but now is manifested, and by the Scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the eternal God, has been made known to all the nations, *leading* to the obedience of faith...

It is a significant mistake to separate our preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ from the revelation of Jesus Christ that occurs in the Law of Moses and the Scriptures of the Prophets. We rightly depend more on the New Covenant for our witness today because we have the New Covenant, but it is

grounded through all the history of Scriptures to the whole narrative, beginning with the book of Genesis, moving through the Law of Moses, and through the Writings and the Prophets.

As Paul spoke from morning until evening, “some were being persuaded by the things spoken, but others would not believe.” Paul does not create division. Jesus creates division. We have seen this pattern of division in all the synagogues where Paul has preached. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is not something that can both be believed and be rejected. A relativistic approach to truth is rejection of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Gospel presents absolute truths to be affirmed or denied. Jesus is the Jesus of the Bible, Old and New Covenant, or He is not Jesus at all.

Paul has a lot of experience debating the Gospel of Jesus with his Jewish countrymen. And led by that experience and by the Holy Spirit, Paul concluded the day with a rebuke. This is Acts 28:25-29.

²⁵ And when they did not agree with one another, they *began* leaving after Paul had spoken one *parting* word, “The Holy Spirit rightly spoke through Isaiah the prophet to your fathers, ²⁶ saying, ‘GO TO THIS PEOPLE AND SAY, “YOU WILL KEEP ON HEARING, BUT WILL NOT UNDERSTAND; AND YOU WILL KEEP ON SEEING, BUT WILL NOT PERCEIVE; ²⁷ FOR THE HEART OF THIS PEOPLE HAS BECOME DULL, AND WITH THEIR EARS THEY SCARCELY HEAR, AND THEY HAVE CLOSED THEIR EYES; OTHERWISE THEY MIGHT SEE WITH THEIR EYES, AND HEAR WITH THEIR EARS, AND UNDERSTAND WITH THEIR HEART AND RETURN, 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 also listen.” ²⁹ When he had spoken these words, the Jews departed, having a great dispute among themselves.

As a first impression, this rebuke seems to come too quickly in Paul’s preaching to this group. Will he not give them a chance to consider such astounding claims being made about Jesus? Must they believe in a day? Well, no. For close to thirty years, the synagogues of Rome have wrestled with the question of Jesus Christ. Our best guess is that the community of believers in Rome came into existence when Jewish pilgrims believed at Pentecost and then they returned to the synagogues of Rome. The claims of Christ are not new to this group.

Paul knows what is going to happen with these more conservative Jews. They are not among the ones who believed and eventually left the synagogue. They are the ones who stayed. They will leave Paul and settle back into the rationalizations they have already used to reject Jesus. The majority will not believe. But some have begun to be persuaded by Paul. And they need a jolt, a kick to push them over. And Paul gives them one. He compares the spiritual resistance that they see in the synagogue to the people of Israel in Isaiah’s day. Just as that people refused to believe, so also the contemporary people of Israel find security in their man-made theology. That is a message for these on the fence. Don’t be overcome by the fact that the majority refuse! That doesn’t mean they are right. In fact, they might be spiritually resistant to the truth. They are comfortable in their own definition of righteousness, their own definition of God. And Paul is saying that spiritual obstinance is not new. They may hear words of Scripture, but they do not understand what they hear. They may see prophecy unfolding before them in the death of Jesus and the response of Gentiles, but they do not perceive the significance of those events. They may have a heart for their traditions and communities, this kind of a zeal for their man-made righteousness, but their hearts are dull the Spirit of God. They have closed their eyes and they have shut their ears. They are like a child who had screwed his eyes shut, so as not to see what he does not want to see. If they would just open their eyes a little and try to see, then God would come and give them sight and heal their hearts.

Paul concludes with the declaration that the Jews don’t like but these are the Prophets, this is the promise of God, “Let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will also listen.” The story of Acts has shown these two things: a largescale rejection of the Gospel by God’s Old Covenant people the Jews, and a largescale reception of the Gospel throughout the Gentile world.

The book of Acts concludes with this sixth and final summary statement found in Acts 28:30-31.

Summary statement (28:30-31)

³⁰ And he stayed two full years in his own rented quarters and was welcoming all who came to him, ³¹ preaching the kingdom of God and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness, unhindered.

I like that! But it is not the resolution to the book of Acts we might expect. During the storm at sea the angel of the Lord informed Paul that he must stand before Caesar. Why does Luke end before Paul stands before Caesar? We are just left hanging. And we are really left hanging in history: we don't really know what happens to Paul from this point out. We have some future letters, and they describe him in prison. We have some letters that make him sound like his life is near end, but we don't know. After these two years we get no historical narrative about Paul.

One reason Luke might end here is that Paul's day in court has not yet come, and he is producing Acts as a defense for Paul before the trial.

That is technically possible. I think it is quite right to accept that Luke used the Gospel of Mark in writing the Gospel of Luke. I think Mark came first and then all the text that you see is the same in Matthew and Luke is that way because both of those authors used Mark as a source. So, if Acts is going to be written now, then Luke must be written, and Mark must be written before this point of time. That is technically possible. Mark depended on his close relationship to Peter, and Church tradition says Peter died in Nero's persecution in 64 A.D. So, if Mark wrote his Gospel a couple of years before Peter's death, it is possible that Luke completed was able to have access to Mark, especially if Mark came to Rome, if Peter was in prison, and so when Mark finishes it and Luke has access to that, he could have completed his Gospel and the book of Acts by 62 A. D. The tightness of that schedule, though, means we ought to consider the possibility that Luke completed Acts after 62 A. D. And if he did, why did not he not tell us whether Paul was released or not? And that is one of those questions we can only think about, but we can't be sure.

A plausible reason is that whatever did happen - whether Paul was released or whether Paul was kept in prison - whatever the outcome, it was well known to everyone who would be reading Acts. And Luke has solidly presented the Roman position that Paul ought to be set free. And so, if it goes bad for Paul before Caesar and Caesar decides to keep him in prison for some reason, Acts is justifying Paul. It is saying everybody knows about that decision. It was an unjust decision. Here is the real story. But this story is not ultimately about Paul. We don't have to resolve what is happening to Paul. This story is ultimately about defining and defending the Gospel of Jesus Christ as that Gospel spreads from Jerusalem outwards, eventually to Rome. This is the story of the kingdom of God being established on earth.

Conclusion

That is the resolution Luke is giving us. In the beginning of Acts, Jesus' disciples asked Him whether now was the time for restoring the Kingdom of Israel. They misunderstood the mission of the Church. Peter, going through Pentecost and as he is growing in his understanding, not much later he preached, "heaven must receive [Jesus] until the period of restoration of all things about which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from ancient time (Acts 3:21)." The physical establishment of the Kingdom of Christ on Earth belongs to the future renewal of Heaven and Earth. That is not the mission of the Church now. The mission of the Church now is Acts 1:8,

You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.

Against all odds, by the power of the Holy Spirit, the gospel went forth. From a scared and oppressed group of 70 men and women praying in an upper room, the Gospel message exploded on Pentecost to be established by the thousands in Jerusalem. The persecution that sought to extinguish the flame kicked embers out into Samaria and Judea. And by the bright light of Jesus' appearing to Paul, a

messenger was chosen to set the Gospel loose from Jewish tradition and culture, so that it might spread through the Empire, even to Rome.

Luke chose to focus on the evangelistic ministries of Peter and Paul. We also recognize in his narrative the importance of what Michael Green calls “amateur evangelists,” like those who returned to their hometowns after Pentecost and those who were scattered by the persecution after Stephen’s death. Normal believers who went everywhere gossiping the Gospel in synagogues, and homes, and in the shops of the marketplace. They went with the joy and conviction that came from their personal experience of life transformation in Jesus.

The book of Acts is a story of individuals who believe and new communities that are formed.

Groups do not repent and believe. Individuals repent and believe. Even when we are told the whole household of Cornelius believed, we know that means each individual of that household had a personal experience with Jesus. Not all the individuals mentioned in Acts responded positively. To some the Gospel is the smell of life, to others the Gospel is the smell of death: some repent, some waver, some oppose. Looking back over the names Luke mentions in Acts, I am reminded this is a real story with real effect in the lives of real people.

These are the names Luke mentions: Theophilus, Peter, John, James, Andrew, Philip, Thomas, Bartholomew, Matthew, James, Simon, Judas son of James, Mary the mother of Jesus, Barsabbas, Matthias, Annas, Caiaphas, John, Alexander, Barnabas, Ananias, Sapphira, Gamaliel, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, Nicolas, Stephen, Saul also called Paul, Simon the magician, an Ethiopian eunuch, Ananias of Damascus, Aeneas, Tabitha, Simon the tanner, Cornelius, Agabus, Herod, Mary the mother of John Mark, John Mark, Blastus, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius, Manaen, Sergius Paulus, Elymas, the priest of Zeus, James the elder, Silas, Timothy, Lydia, a slave-girl, a jailer, Jason, Dionysius, Damaris, Aquila, Priscilla, Titius Justus, Crispus, Gallio, Apollos, Tyrannus, Sceva, Demetrius, Gaius, Aristarchus, the town clerk, Sopater, Secundus, Gaius, Tychicus, Trophimus, Eutychus, Mnason, Claudius Lysias, Felix, Tertullus, Drusilla, Porcius Festus, King Agrippa, Bernice, Julius, Publius, and of course Luke, who does not name himself.

The mission of the Church is to give witness to Jesus Christ so that individual people may know their need, may know their Savior, may enter into the Kingdom of God. And while faith in Jesus is something we experience as individuals, it is also something we experience together in community. The mission is to give witness to Jesus Christ, calling people to repent and believe and gather together in ekklesia, assemblies of believers who share their joy of knowing Jesus, who bear one another’s burdens, who help each other grow in love and who carry on the mission of sharing the Gospel in their town, or city, or region.

Luke expressed the growth of the Kingdom in communal terms. Remember our six summary statements.

Acts 6:7, “The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith.”

Acts 9:31, “So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up; and going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it continued to increase.”

Acts 12:24, “But the word of the Lord continued to grow and to be multiplied.”

Acts 16:5, “So the churches were being strengthened in the faith, and were increasing in number daily.”

Acts 19:20, “So the word of the Lord was growing mightily and prevailing.”

Acts 28:30–31, “And he stayed two full years in his own rented quarters and was welcoming all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness, unhindered.”

Luke's theological narrative has taught us that the Gospel insists Jesus is the only name by which a person might be saved. Luke showed us how the Gospel transitioned out from Old Covenant Jewish culture to New Covenant Gentile cultures. We understand that the Gospel speaks into the politics, religion, philosophy, and economy of all human societies. We see that we are not called to build a Christian kingdom patterned after the kingdoms of this world. We recognize that the Kingdom of Christ expands as individuals of faith and communities of faith live in the love and obedience of the King who is above all kings. We have been shown how, in a short thirty-year period, the spiritual Kingdom of Christ became established throughout the Roman Empire. And we understand this was only the beginning of the story.

In the first verse of Acts, writing about his Gospel, Luke explained, "The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach..." Jesus began to do and teach in the Gospel of Luke. That was the story of His physical presence on Earth with His disciples. Luke is saying that Jesus continued to do and teach after He ascended into Heaven. He ascended into Heaven, so that the Holy Spirit might indwell believers. As disciples live for Him in the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus continues to do and teach through them. The Gospel of Luke was the first chapter. The Book of Acts is the second chapter. We live in the successive chapters.

The Book of Acts wraps up with Paul in Rome, and yet, leaves the story open for all the chapters that must come later. The Gospel is to go out to the remotest parts of the Earth. It has arrived in Rome. That is only the beginning. The story must continue. And it has. The Gospel of Jesus Christ has spread around the world. We are living in that story. We are writing the next chapter of what Jesus will do and teach through us who believe in our generation. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, go and be my witnesses, in your Jerusalem, in your Judea and Samaria, and out into the remotest places of the Earth.

Reflection questions

1. Read Acts 28:7-31. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. The defense given in this last section of Acts Part VI parallels the defense given in the first section of Part VI in chapter 20. There the narrative of Paul's journey to Jerusalem was interrupted with the account of the boy's resurrection and a pause for Paul to speak to the Ephesian elders. Here the narrative of Paul's journey to Rome is interrupted with the account of healing on Malta before concluding with Paul speaking to the Jewish elders of Rome.
 - a. How do the resurrection of the boy and the healing of Publius' father serve as a defense of Paul and the gospel?
 - b. Do the words of Paul to the Jewish elders sound like a defense to you?
3. Read again the first verses of Acts Part VI in 19:21-22 to remind yourself of Paul's sense that he must go to Jerusalem and then to Rome. Then reflect on the five sections that follow each with a danger to be avoided, misconceptions to be corrected and defenses made. What moments stand out to most in affirming God's sovereign hand over Paul's life? What life principles or truths do you see in the way God took Paul on this journey?
4. Considering back over the whole book of Acts, how would you summarize "this salvation of God that has been sent to the Gentiles (28:28)." What is this gospel of salvation according to Acts?
5. Read again the disciples' question to Jesus in 1:6, "Is this the time you are restoring the kingdom?" Also read Jesus' redirection in verses 7 and 8. Now at the end of Acts we read that Paul was preaching the kingdom of God and teaching concerning Jesus Christ. What is this preaching of the kingdom, according to the book of Acts? How did Peter and Paul carry out the statement Jesus' made in Acts 1:8?
6. What is the role of believers in the spread of the Gospel? What is the role of God in building his kingdom?