

Be Challenged

Acts 28:17-31

It is with mixed emotions that we gather around this passage today. There is a bitter/sweet potion of sadness and joy as we come to the conclusion of our study in Acts. We began this journey on the first Sunday of January 2010 and will end today as we enter into the holiday season of 2011. It's been quite a journey. In some respects our passage is a fitting one as we conclude the series with a charge and reflect on the 40th anniversary of the church. I was recently reminded that on the very first Sunday this church met Pastor Essenberg preached from Acts. Here we are 40 years later still in Acts.

Perhaps Art said it best when recently he quipped that Pastor Howie just wants us to get our Acts together. In a very real sense that is an accurate statement. I wanted this series to be more than just a historical account of the rise of the church from its inception on the day of Pentecost when 3,000 people were saved in the very first evangelistic campaign. I wanted it to be more than just a recitation of events that spread the gospel in those humble beginnings in Jerusalem to its spread throughout the corners of the Roman Empire. I hope I have challenged you sufficiently by declaring that great things can happen when we trust the empowering Holy Spirit to work in us and then through us. **As we embark on a new chapter in the history of this church will we in some way mirror the image of the early church by taking the gospel to our Jerusalem, our Judea, our Samaria and our world?**

As we come to the conclusion of this study, and as the title of the message suggests, I want you to be challenged. Today it is my hope and desire to look at this passage and leave you with three thoughts.

I want to take a Pastoral approach.

I want to make practical application.

I want to make a personal appeal.

I. A PASTORAL APPROACH

Before we look at the text I want to share a story with you that I recently read from a friend. I have known Dennis for quite a few years. We worked together in Ann Arbor and for about 6 years played for our company's volleyball team in the city league. He has been very active in pursuing a coaching role in volleyball and taken numerous national certification tests. Recently he was invited to attend a camp for the US Olympic team. Not long ago he was attending his local club's award banquet where one of the father's gave the keynote address. In his remarks he specifically mentioned my friend who during two years of coaching his daughter not only helped her develop skills on the court but spent time encouraging her during those days when she would leave in tears because she just couldn't get some skill. Dennis stuck beside her and encouraged her through those difficulties. This father spoke about how he stood beside her and had a positive impact on his daughter giving her the confidence to continue to aspire to do her best.

In **Acts 23** we find the Apostle Paul sitting in a jail cell perhaps wondering what would happen to him after having been falsely accused by the Sanhedrin of breaking the religious law regarding the Temple. They attempted to beat him to death and would have succeeded were it not for the spontaneous reaction of the centurion and his troops swooping in to save Paul from being killed. As He sat in that cell, a reassuring word came to Paul from the Lord. Turn to **23:11** **"The following night the Lord stood near Paul and said, 'Take courage! As you have testified about Me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome.'"**

If you haven't already, would you underline that phrase **"the Lord stood near."** Repeat that with me **"the Lord stood near."** When there are times of uncertainty and difficulty, insert your name in the place of Paul to remind you that during those difficulties, those hardships, the Lord is standing near. Put a book mark there so that it is easily

turned to and read and remembered. Remember that the Lord will get you to His appointed place.

Fast forward to chapter 28 and the end of the book. It's been over two years since Paul sat in that cell and a lot has happened to him. False accusations. Multiple trials under different heads of state. Assassination plots. Storms. Shipwreck. We read these words of encouragement that remind us how God keeps His word; His promises never fail. Perhaps in a casual way Luke pens them as a matter of fact for Theophilus to whom he is writing this account. He wants to be accurate in describing the events and so he simply pens these words in **verse 14 – “and so we came to Rome.”** Then again we read in **verse 16 – “When we got to Rome.”** How simple those words read yet how profoundly rich they are with meaning that *God keeps His word*. Repeat that with me – *God keeps His word*. Paul had written earlier to the Romans that it was his desire to visit them. He probably had in mind when he would travel there and was calculating how he would get there. I'll leave in the spring, visit some of the old churches, catch a boat in Philippi and head over to Corinth and then up the coast and over to Italy. God had other plans on how Paul would get there. **“For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” (Jeremiah 29:11)** **Would you agree with me that God's ways are sometimes not our ways? Would you also agree with me that God's ways are better than our ways?** It wasn't Paul's will but God's way that got him to Rome. God got him to his destination, now it was up to Paul to carry out his responsibility to testify about God. Turn in your Bibles to Acts 28:17-31.

Notice Paul's petition found in **verses 17-29**.

A. Paul's Petition – v. 17-29

They arrive in Rome. Paul gets settled into his new rented house where he will spend the next two years

as a prisoner awaiting to stand before Nero on the charges that were brought against him in Jerusalem. Bear in mind that even though Paul is in a house he is still a prisoner, tethered to a guard night and day. Believing in the adage that there's no time like the present, within three days of his arrival he called for a meeting with the leading Jews of the city. About 10 years prior to this Claudius had evicted all the Jews from Rome, but since his death many had returned to the city. Remember that it was always Paul's mode of operation to enter a city, seek out the Jews first and teach them about the Messiah. He couldn't go to them, but he invited them to come to him. In **verses 17-22** Paul gives an assessment.

1. Paul's assessment – v. 17-22

He tells the Jews the reason he has come to Rome and why he is in chains. He was arrested in Jerusalem even though he was innocent of any wrongdoing. Understand that Paul is not bringing an accusation either against Israel or against his fellow Jews. He wanted acquittal from the charges not accusation against his own people. That would certainly alienate him from them and be a greater stumbling block in presenting the gospel to them. He also noted in his assessment that even the Roman officials believed he was innocent but because petitions continued to prolong a verdict he was compelled to use his Roman citizenship to appeal to Caesar to decide the case.

There is one additional note we make in Paul's assessment and reason for gathering these Jews together. He not only wanted to find out what they had heard about him and the tone they have toward him, he also wanted to share with them the hope of Israel – that the Messiah had come.

Their response was that they had received no word from the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem about Paul or about this case. They had, though, heard some very disturbing words about those who followed the Way. As **verse 22** notes **“people everywhere are**

talking against this sect.” To them it had a bad reputation. Truth be told, they probably had heard something informal about Paul, but wanted to hear from him first before they drew any formal conclusions.

After Paul’s initial assessment we see Paul’s assertion in **verses 23-29**.

2. Paul’s assertion – v. 23-29

Curious to know more about what Paul was teaching they arranged a future date to meet. Many more Jews came to this meeting. This time it was an entire day of teaching. From morning to evening they poured over the Old Testament Scriptures using both the teachings of the Law as given to them by Moses and as well the prophecies related to the Messiah. He taught about the kingdom of God and that Jesus was the Messiah. Salvation is not by keeping the Law but through the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus.

Our passage notes that some were convinced and others remained hardened, unmoved to the facts of Scripture no matter how compelling they may have been. Pride, not ignorance is the stumbling block of many who refuse to trust in Christ for salvation. Pride stresses that in some way I have responsibility to do something to earn salvation. But Jesus stresses that we need to come in the same spirit of humility in which the sinner came crying out to God in the Temple to save him. Broken of pride, he needed to be saved.

Moved by the Holy Spirit, Paul quoted from the prophet **Isaiah 6:9-10** speaking about the hardness of their hearts. When you ponder the history of Israel beginning with their exodus from Egypt we see time and time again that they refused to follow God, refused to trust God. Their refusal to listen to the truth has been a noose around their neck as they continued to reject the Messiah. Jesus quoted from this same passage indicating that Israel *COULD* not

believe because Israel *WOULD* not believe. We know people like that today. Though the truth is as plain as the nose on their face, they refuse to believe because they choose to disbelieve. As one author noted **“The nation as a whole was unable to believe because they constantly rejected God’s revelation. He punished them with judicial blindness and ‘deadened...hearts’”** so they would not believe.

Paul’s assertion, his declaration to them was that they were just like their ancestors – unwilling to see and accept the truth. As was the case in so many other instances when the Jews rejected Paul’s declaration of the good news of the gospel, he turned to the Gentiles. This is further indication that the gospel is for all people. Jew and Gentile. American and African. European and Asian. Male and female. Young and old. Rich and poor. All who call on the name of the Lord will be saved. All who believe that Jesus died for their sins, and rose again will also be triumphant over spiritual death. With the blood of Christ applied to the door of their heart, God sees them covered in the blood of Christ and forgiven of sin. They are saved. Many of the Jews in Rome who heard Paul that day in the stubbornness of their heart refused the salvation that God offers to those who believe. They rejected Christ the Messiah.

Paul petitioned the Jews with a brief defense of his innocence and with a declaration of the Gospel using the very Scriptures they taught from. Paul would remain in Rome under arrest for two years. During that time there is no indication that his accusers ever came to bring their charges against Paul. They probably figured that if they could not win their case before the local and municipal magistrates they sure wouldn’t win standing before Caesar. If they did stand before Caesar and lost, the court was not favorable to those who brought false allegations to bear on a Roman citizen and could be severely punished. Besides, they had a partial win with getting Paul out of Jerusalem.

In the conclusion of this passage we take a look at Paul's preaching.

B. Paul's Preaching – v. 30-31

Paul spent little time working on his defense. He spent most of his time declaring the gospel. It was during this time that he wrote letters to the Ephesians, the Colossians, the Philippians and to Philemon.

There are two parts to his preaching. We note first in **30-31a** that he testified about salvation.

1. He testified about salvation – v. 30 -31a

It was with boldness and without hindrance he preached the gospel of Christ – the kingdom of God. Paul had a fire and desire to proclaim Christ. That word boldness means with confidence, frankness, assurance, openness, freely. It comes from two words meaning all speech or freedom of speech.

He spoke the word of God clearly. It was always about Jesus Christ.

He spoke the word of God consistently. It was always to both the Jew and the Gentile. To everyone he could he proclaimed Christ.

He spoke the word of God with certainty. It was always truth, supported by evidence from the Old Testament Scriptures.

During this time people like Onesimus were saved. He was the slave of Philemon. He's now a brother in Christ. Welcome him.

From **Genesis 12:3** to **Revelation 14:6** we see throughout Scripture and throughout the world the evidence of God's promise that through Abraham all the nations of the world would be blessed because through his lineage would come the Messiah by whom and through whom man can believe and receive eternal life. So that by faith in the finished work of Christ on the cross we can be a part of His forever family. Then truly will come about what John saw that people from every tribe

and tongue and nation will be in heaven to and for the glory of God.

Paul testified about salvation. Notice finally that Paul testified about sanctification.

2. He testified about sanctification – v. 31b

“He taught about the Lord Jesus Christ.” He didn't stop with getting them saved. He continued to help them grow in their faith. I would suspect that from his earlier letter to them, they had some profound questions related to what he wrote. The other day several of us were discussing this two year journey in Acts and Cindy mentioned that when she was in High School Pastor Essenberg spent those four years in a study of Romans. I'm sure they had some questions about justification by faith, spiritual gifts, the role of the Holy Spirit in prayer, eternal security and many other questions. *Faith in Christ not only brings a change in what you believe but in how you behave.*

Though Paul was chained physically, the gospel was not. Boldly and without hindrance he preached the gospel. By the empowerment of the Holy Spirit the church began in Jerusalem. It spread to the surrounding region of Judea, then on to Samaria and here at the end of the book we see that the gospel spread to the very capital of the known world.

The gospel spread geographically as promised in **Acts 1:8**.

The gospel spread across gender as we see that men and women alike responded to the truth that Jesus Christ is the Savior. Women like Lydia, men like the Ethiopian Eunuch were saved.

The gospel spread across generations as we see entire families like the Philippian jailor and the family of Cornelius were saved.

Through the work of the Holy Spirit in us, the church continues to grow. Believers are added daily to the kingdom of God. So while the book ends our work does not. The final chapter has not been written. We each have a part in what God is

doing in the church and through the church as we impact people around us locally and through our missionaries globally. That impact is eternal.

Now I want to take a look a practical application.

II. A PRACTICAL APPLICATION

In his closing remarks about the book of Acts Warren Wiersbe had this to say: “Luke did not write his book simply to record ancient history, he wrote to encourage the church in every age to be faithful to the Lord and carry the gospel to the ends of the earth.”

The great preacher Charles Spurgeon wrote these challenging words: “What has begun with so much heroism ought to be continued with ardent zeal, since we are assured that the same Lord is mighty still to carry on His heavenly desires.”

The book of Acts has shown us that the Holy Spirit is the source of power that grows the church, that blesses the church, that teaches the church. When we are committed to walking in the Spirit then who we are and what we do and what we say will have an eternal impact in the life of others. Through the Holy Spirit we will be both salt and light bringing people to Jesus. **So how are we doing? Are we fulfilling the priorities of Jesus as told to His disciples in Matthew 28:18-20 and Acts 1:8?** We have already been assured from the writings of **Isaiah (55:11)** that when the Word of God is proclaimed it will not return void. Its intended purpose will be accomplished. Just as Paul did in **verse 31**, our priority is to teach the Word to those who believe so that they grow in faith and to those who don't believe so they can know Christ as Savior. **When it comes to our vision, our mission to gather, grown and go, as a church how are we doing?**

Paul spent two years in Rome boldly testifying about the salvation God provides just as was

promised and many lives were touched. Paul spent two years in Rome testifying about sanctification, helping believers grow in their faith. My friend Dennis shared in that story about the impact he has had in the lives of individuals through the game of volleyball. Our commission is to do the same, to touch others with the gospel, to have an impact on them for eternity.

Matthew 5:13-16 – (salt packets to remind that we are to be the salt of the earth.)

An anniversary is not the culmination of events but a continuation of activity. It's a reminder of where we have been and a reminder of where we are going

I want to close with a personal appeal.

III. A PERSONAL APPEAL

Here are some sobering statistics about American churches gathered in a 2008 survey. Keep in mind this is just one report. Others may have different data.

3,500 – 4,000 churches close their doors each year.
Half of all churches did not add one new member through conversion growth.

Only 15% of churches in the United States are growing and just 2.2% of those are growing by conversion growth.

Churches lose an estimated 2,765,000 people each year to nominalism and secularism.

1,400 pastors in America leave the ministry monthly.

Here is my appeal and challenge to us as a congregation to ensure that we are not one of those statistics. Jot them down, read them, pray about them, and then ask what can I do to make them happen.

1. Equip – **Ephesians 4:11-16**
2. Exhort – **Hebrews 10:24-25**

3. Endure –

I Corinthians 9:24-27

I Corinthians 15:54-58

Philippians 3:14

Hebrews 12:1-3

In 1983, Australia hosted its ultra-marathon, a 573.7 mile foot race from Sydney to Melbourne. This race takes *days* to run, and professionals from all over the world came to participate. Shortly before the race began, a farmer named Cliff Young, wearing overalls and goulashes over his boots, walked up to the registration table and requested a number to enter the race. The people at the registration table thought it was a joke—that somebody was setting them up—so they laughed. But Cliff Young said, "No, I'd really like to run." So they gave him a number and pinned it on his old overalls.

Cliff Young walked over to the start of the race. All the other professional runners, who were decked out in all their running regalia, looked at him like he was crazy. The crowd snickered. They laughed even more when the gun went off and the race began, because all those professional runners had sculpted bodies and beautiful strides, but not Cliff Young. He didn't even run like a runner. Cliff Young ran with an awkward, goofy-looking shuffle. All through the crowd people were laughing, and finally, someone called out, "Get that old fool off the track!"

Five days, 14 hours, and four minutes later, at 1:25 in the morning, Cliff Young shuffled across the finish line of the 573.7 mile ultra-marathon. He had won the race. And he didn't win by a matter of minutes or even an hour or two. The second place runner was nine hours and 56 minutes behind him. Cliff Young had set a new world record for the ultra-marathon. The press mobbed him wondering what kind of special running shoes he must have had, and they rummaged through his backpack wondering what he'd survived on—he'd lived primarily on pumpkin seeds and water—and then they discovered the secret to his success: Cliff Young had shuffled his way to victory without ever sleeping. The other runners would run for 18 hours straight, and then stop and sleep for three or four hours. He endured running five days, 14 hours, and four minutes, oh, and he was 61 years old.

I have asked Robyn to come and sing a song she has sung here before. It is a reminder to endure, to ponder when the going gets tough for us as individuals, when the going gets tough for us as families, when the going gets tough for us as a church to Press On. That's what Paul did – He pressed on, kept going even when others mocked.

(Song)

We cannot sit in complacency and think that the church, this church will just continue on after we are gone. **What kind of legacy, what kind of heritage are we leaving? One author rightly concluded that we shouldn't "just enjoy God's grace – extend it."** Pass it on. Press on.

There is one final thing I would like to do as we close this service and conclude our study in Acts.

Acts 1:8 "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." This isn't so much a command to do as it is a commission to be. It is something powerful and propelling.

I hold in my hand a replica of a baton. Batons are used in relay races. I've run my share of them: 880, mile, distance medley, 2 mile and the 4 relay. The success of the race is when each runner passes the baton to his teammate and so on to the conclusion of the race. The conclusion of our spiritual race has not yet been completed. I have inscribed **Acts 1:8** on the shaft of this baton to remind of our commission and I'm asking for a commitment.

My challenge is this: **who among us will take the baton and pass it on to the next generation so that this church will continue to be salt and light Hartland? During our closing hymn will you come forward and take the baton? Will you leave a legacy so this church will continue to celebrate?**