

Sermon File # 924

Scripture Text: Acts 28:30-31

Sermon Title: *Writing Acts 29*

Manuscript written by Roger Roberts and sermon preached

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Writing Acts 29

Introduction:

Open your Bibles with me to the closing verses of The Book of Acts, chapter 28, verses 30 & 31. Today we leap over nearly eight chapters to conclude our series of sermons from Acts. In these closing chapters of his second volume (The Gospel According to Luke being the first), Luke details Paul's return to Jerusalem following his three missionary journeys. Even though he was warned by a prophet that arrest and danger awaited him in Jerusalem (21:10ff), Paul was nevertheless determined to go to the city, being willing to die "for the name of the Lord Jesus" (21:13), desiring only to complete his mission.

Indeed, Paul was arrested in Jerusalem, yet he knew he would not die there because the Lord had told him he would preach the message of Jesus in Rome (23:11). Paul indeed arrived in Rome, courtesy of the Roman army, who shipped him along with other prisoners to this capital city of the empire. This perilous journey, made memorable by a storm and shipwreck, was yet another opportunity for Paul to share the message of Jesus. Arriving in Rome, Paul was placed under house arrest, while he waited for two years for his trial before Caesar. He lived in his own quarters, paying his rent from his tent making trade. Although he was chained to a Roman soldier (20), evidently his writing hand was

free, since during this two-year span he wrote his Prison Epistles of Philippians, Ephesians, Colossians and Philemon. Evidence is strong that Paul was released after this first Roman imprisonment, when he embarked on one last missionary venture, perhaps going as far as Spain. Then he was arrested once again in Rome, confined to a dungeon, where he wrote his Pastoral Letters (1 & 2 Timothy and Titus).

Let's look at these last two verses in Acts, a brief but important passage for concluding the sermons from this important book.

Read **Acts 28:30-31**.

Much ink has been spilled by Bible scholars over this abrupt ending to Acts. Some conjecture that Luke intended to write a third volume, making a three-volume set, completing what he began his gospel and Acts. Teachers and commentators wonder why Luke doesn't finish the story about Paul, where he went following these two years and how and when he was martyred by the Romans. After all, Paul was the key player for more than half of Acts and the greatest missionary in church history, taking the message of Jesus to Rome and beyond, "the ends of the earth" in Jesus' commission to the church (1:8).

Scholastic conjecture notwithstanding, I side with scholar FF Bruce, who says what we have in Luke's final verses is an "artistic conclusion" (Page 525, reference below). Luke sets up this "abrupt" ending with the way he begins this volume. As we noted in the first sermon, from the first verses of Acts, Luke says that his gospel was about "all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven" (1:1f. See sermon preached 20 January 2008, from Acts 1:1-5, *Continuing What Jesus Began*, posted on this Web site). We've noted that Acts could well be titled, "The Acts of the Risen Jesus through His Spirit-filled Church." Luke gives us a 28-chapter narrative of what the risen Lord Jesus continued to do what he began in his earthly ministry and was made possible by his crucifixion, death and resurrection.

I believe what Luke is telling us with his abrupt ending is that the narrative isn't finished. We are now part of this Spirit-filled church, and Jesus continues to do his kingdom work until finally the story reaches its grand and glorious conclusion when Jesus returns and consummates his kingdom on earth. We today are invited to write the story, to join in the writing of chapter 29, as the Holy Spirit continues to do his great work. As NT Wright says, Paul is not the real hero of Acts. Neither is Peter. The hero is the Word of God, the eternal and living Word, Jesus, who continues to write God's story through his Spirit-empowered church. We are all called into this drama, and to be a part of the cast, and are to let God continue his story through our lives. Thus, we are part of the writing of Acts 29 (See Wright, pages 246 & 248f, below reference).

Let's note that in writing Acts 29 we are...

➤ **Telling a great story**

At the end of Acts we see the triumph of the Word of God, which, says one commentator, is the real hero of the book (See page 548 in Polhill, reference below). Paul, Peter and all of the apostles have their time and place on the stage, but finally left standing is the triumphant story, the good news of Jesus, which is irrepressible. The Word of God is fully inspired by the Holy Spirit and our canon of Scripture is complete, and we dare not try to add to the written authority, our Bible. But the Word of God is good news that remains to be told to all. We must allow the Holy Spirit to continue to spread the influence of his word as he writes this next chapter of our being on “the stage” of history, as we tell the story...

- *Of Good News*

For two years and inside his own rented quarters, while chained to a guard and under house arrest, Paul preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus (31). This was an audacious message for Paul to proclaim, while chained to a Roman soldier, awaiting trial before the most powerful political figure in the first century—Caesar, Emperor of the Roman Empire. Paul preached a greater kingdom and a greater Lord, one who made Caesar “a low-grade parody” (page 245, NT Wright). Paul preached that the crucified Messiah was raised from the dead and is now enthroned as Lord over all creation, Caesar and his kingdom included. Paul preached that the Kingdom of God in Christ has all authority over the kingdoms of this world and will finally eradicate all evil empires and will rule perfectly over a remade creation. With the crucifixion of Jesus and his bodily resurrection, the strangle-hold of Satan has been broken and the work of putting this fallen world to rights, to borrow a phrase from NT Wright (above), has begun.

The presence and accessibility of this Kingdom was the message that Jesus brought, and he preached the availability of the Kingdom to those who had been overlooked, the poor, needy and of doubtful reputation (Mark 1:14f; Luke 4:18f). The way into this kingdom is by recognizing the reality of sin and estrangement from holy God and turning about to trust and follow him, which is the change of mind and heart that we call repentance. Entrance into this eternal rule of God and gift of a new life called eternal life is possible through the crucified and risen Lord Jesus.

Paul thus proclaimed the Kingdom and also taught about the Lord Jesus Christ. Proclamation is an announcement and teaching is a reinforcement and explanation of what has been announced (See Ajith Fernando, page 631, below reference, for an explanation of the complementary roles of preaching and teaching). Paul taught about Jesus, no doubt from the prophecies about

Messiah from Old Testament Scriptures and also from the oral gospel tradition of Jesus' life and teachings which were being circulated in the earliest church. He taught about the person and work of Jesus as the eternal Son of God and also about his Lordship and enthronement as King of kings and Lord of lords. I'm sure, as he did on previous occasions (22:1ff; 26:1ff), Paul told the story of his personal life-changing encounter with the risen Lord. He would have shared how that he, the worst of all sinners, was now an example of the power of the message of Jesus to save anybody (1Timothy 1:12-17; Romans 1:16).

Paul then would have taught that the availability of this kingdom, the saving power of the risen Jesus and a personal relationship with God are...

- *For all the people*

Even under house arrest Paul practiced hospitality, opening his quarters to all comers. He offered an extended, two-year long Alpha Course! Earlier he had called together the leaders of the Jews, which was always Paul's modus operandi. He took the message to the Jews first but then, after giving them an opportunity which most of them rejected, he turned quickly to the Gentiles, the lost pagans. We can see in his message to the Jews and his quotation from Isaiah 6:9f (28:26f) that Paul realized their responsibility for their willful blindness and deafness to the Word. Thus Paul directed his message to the receptive pagans (28).

And as Jesus continues to write the story of the advancement of his kingdom, he will draw all people to himself (John 12:32) and will lead us to reach out to them. We can believe that here in Belgium there are many, among nationals as well as the expatriates, whom God is drawing to himself. Like Paul, we are to reach out to and welcome them with our hospitality, both in our homes and in our church, and seek to relate to them what God has done for us and what he can do for them by bringing them under his reign, his kingdom. There are those God is preparing to receive the message and our part is to join him. We must be available and alert to the opportunities God gives, just as was Paul.

I submit that we have another "how much more" argument from Acts. If Paul could seize and utilize the opportunity to reach the unconverted while chained to a Roman guard and confined to house arrest, how much more should we seize the opportunity given to us, to relate to our neighbors, work or school associates! We have a great story to tell and as we tell it faithfully, God will continue to write his story with our lives as people will be brought into his kingdom.

We can see from his Letter to the Philippians that God used Paul to lead his guards, members of the elite Praetorian Guard, to faith. And believers there in Rome also were encouraged by Paul's faithful witness (Philippians 1:12-14). Can you imagine what it would be like, if you were unconverted, and were chained to Paul for your four-hour shift every day? You do you think was more

uncomfortable, Paul or the poor guard? We can believe that many of these soldiers were led to Christ, just as was the jailer in Philippi (16:25ff). As William Barclay wrote, "Many a man must have gone from his guard duty with Christ in his heart" (See below).

Let's note also that in writing this 29th Chapter, we are doing so...

➤ **With great inspiration**

Of course we realize that the Scriptures are complete and we cannot add to the written Word of God, the Bible. But the Holy Spirit is still at work and the risen Jesus is active to continue his kingdom advance to its final completion. To write his final chapter of human history, Jesus is at work within his church through the Holy Spirit today.

One theme that runs throughout the Book of Acts is that the church always lived and shared Jesus...

- *With boldness*

The Greek word for boldness in Acts is not the same as for the confidence that comes from rhetorical ability, but rather is a gift from the Holy Spirit alone (See Schlier, page 882, referenced below). The boldness of the Spirit-empowered believer is not a forcefulness of personality or an aggressive forwardness that comes from self-confidence. Rather, it's a confidence in and an awareness of the risen Lord Jesus and the Holy Spirit within, who has promised to honor his Word and to give us the words to say at the right moment (John 16:12ff; Luke 12:11f).

Like the other apostles, Paul's boldness to share the message of Jesus was irrepressible. They couldn't help speaking about Jesus, despite the threats of the officials (4:20). Paul's boldness was energized by his zeal for the kingdom and by the love of Christ for all, including his enemies (2 Corinthians 5:14). His boldness was the freedom of speech that comes to those who are confident that the sovereign God is in charge of all of our circumstances and that he leads us in every encounter.

Paul could witness with boldness and so we also can let God write a new chapter with our lives as we live and speak by the Spirit...

- *With freedom*

Paul realized he was exactly where he was meant to be within the plan of God for his life. This is a wonderfully freeing thought. If God is in control, what have we to fear and even to hold back? Thus Paul realized that his setting, in his

house arrest, was exactly what God had in mind for him. Thus Paul, not his guards, was the one with true freedom.

Actually, the final word in Acts is the Greek word translated “unhindered,” and the final point Luke wishes to make is that the message of Jesus has freely been proclaimed worldwide, despite the attempts of Satan and his dupes to silence it. In fact, New Testament scholar Frank Stagg says that this word “unhindered” is the climactic word that expresses the denouement of The Book of Acts. Nothing can hinder the advancement of the message of Jesus or the witness of his faithful servants such as Paul (see Stagg, below reference). Probably during this imprisonment, Paul wrote to the Philippians that his imprisonment served to advanced the gospel, giving him an opportunity to evangelize the Roman guards and to encourage his fellow believers (Philippians 1:12f). God was using Paul to proclaim the message of Jesus in the capital city of the entire civilized world.

This is a truth we need to grasp for ourselves. When we are fully surrendered to Christ, we are the freest people on earth, whatever our present circumstances. Look how Paul seized his circumstances. He was able to write his beloved and encouraging Prison Epistles during these two years. After his imprisonment of two years, he was released and we don't know exactly what he did or where he went but we know he was faithful to the end, until his earthly task, the chapter of his life, had reached its conclusion.

Because we are called to “fill up the sufferings of Jesus” through a cruciform, Christ-reflecting life (Colossians 1:24), we realize that we are never “under the circumstances,” anymore than was Jesus on the cross. In his atoning death for us, Jesus won the victory for us. And in similar way, we are called to take up our cross, die to self and let the suffering love of Jesus be seen in our suffering love (Luke 9:23ff; Galatians 2:20; 1 Peter 4:12ff). As John Stott notes, the ministry of Paul was not weakened but rather was strengthened by his suffering. Nothing, adds Stott, proves the sincerity of our beliefs like our willingness to suffer for them (See page 404, below reference)

Ajith Fernando reminds us of the circumstances of John Bunyan (1628-88), the great pastor and writer, who served the Lord powerfully during his 12 years of imprisonment in the Bedford, England jail. (In his first 6-year term he wrote 9 books, and during his next 6-year sentence he wrote only two, but one was a classic that is second only to the Bible in its impact on the Christian world—*Pilgrim's Progress*. Bunyan even carved a flute out of a rail from his prison bench so he could secretly offer hymns of praise to God. See Fernando, page 630, reference below).

The message of Acts 29 continues to be written today by God's faithful witnesses around the world, who have complete confidence that he is sovereign over their circumstances and has them exactly where he wants them. And we too should have the same sense of freedom that we are exactly where he wants us to be

and have all the opportunity we need to join him in his work and to manifest the presence of the suffering and now risen Lord Jesus.

Because the Holy Spirit of sovereign God is writing Acts 29 with our lives, we can be confident this final chapter will be written...

➤ **With a great conclusion**

Every great story needs a great conclusion. As we've noted, Luke gave a masterful ending because he left it open-ended. In other words, he expects us to write the final chapter.

- *What Jesus began...*

The Spirit of God is alive and well, working within each one of us to finish the propagation of the message of Jesus and the extension of his kingdom to every nation, tribe, people and language (Revelation 7:9). Jesus will work through you and me until the gospel goes to every nation and to all for whom he died (Mark 13:10). Jesus gave his Great Commission (1:8) and he is at work in us still today until the earth is filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea (Isaiah 11:9).

The story that God began has been going on for millennia, since the fall of man and the beginning of God's rescue mission through his chosen people. And what Israel failed to do was fulfilled by Jesus, who brought God's salvation plan down to us and made grace available to all who call upon the name of the Lord (Romans 10:8-13). The main work that Jesus began to do was to transform lives by his power—power made possible by his death and resurrection and available to all who believe. Jesus' greatest work is the transformation of the lives of his disciples, his learning followers. And Jesus continues to transform our lives, bringing us ever closer to the likeness of his character. That work continues and what he has begun...

- *He will finish*

Paul's mission came to its final conclusion, sometime between AD 64&67, after his second imprisonment under the brutal Caesar Nero. But his final end, by some form of execution and martyrdom, didn't come about until his mission was completed, perhaps even after a journey to Spain, which was his desire (Romans 15:24, 28). Then he was finally arrested and imprisoned again in Rome, this time in a dungeon, from which he wrote his Pastoral Epistles (1 & 2 Timothy and Titus). From there Paul wrote the conclusion to his Book of Acts, Chapter 29, when he wrote to Timothy, perhaps on the even of his martyrdom, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith" (2 Timothy 4:7). Paul was confident and was ready to exit stage as a conqueror,

even though to the eyes of the world he was a victim of the Roman courts, even as his Lord appeared to be a victim of his accusers.

We can be confident, as was Paul, that Jesus will finish his story and his Word will triumph. As one has said, throughout Acts the Word triumphs but not the bearers of the Word, who often were reviled, persecuted and even put to death. Here we see Paul in chains and hear that later he was executed. And yet that's the way God does his work in this fallen world, through his cruciform, suffering and even dying church (See page 527, Polhill, below). We can also be confident that the Word and will of God shall triumph. If we remain faithful, God will use our lives, our prayers and our witness to extend his kingdom in the most unlikely of places and under the most unlikely of circumstances. It won't triumph because we have a better argument or know how to convince someone of the truth of God by intellectual arguments. The Word will not triumph because of our ability, strength, success or power in the eyes of the world. Rather, the Word will go forward and triumph through our faith, gospel living, sharing, praying and suffering love.

Conclusion:

Perhaps a good nickname ("bijnaam" in Dutch) for our church might be "The Church of Acts 29." We here at IBC Brussels are eager to let God write through us his final chapter of his growing kingdom. And we should all aspire to become Acts 29 Christians, those God is using to write the final chapter of his church triumphant.

We can be sure that God will finish what he has started. The Book of Revelation reminds us that things will come to God's appointed conclusion. As Darrell Bock says, the reason Luke doesn't give us the details of the end of Paul's life is that Paul is not the focus of the Book of Acts—*God* is. The risen Lord Jesus is the hero of Acts (See page 760, below reference). We do know that Paul indeed finished well, as we've noted from his last will and testament written to Timothy. He had run the race and fought the fight and finished the race marked out for him. Now he was confident that "the crown of righteousness awaited him (2 Timothy 4:7).

But the crown is preceded by a cross. The final chapter, Scripture tells us, will be a period of great tribulation, which may well be taking place in parts of the world today. And the chapter that God writes with our lives may come at a great cost to us personally. But as I was reminded in my Scripture reading and listening prayer this morning, the cost of discipleship is the cross we must carry, one of denying self-centered self and any human relationships that would stand in the way of our following Jesus (Luke 14:25ff).

And the risen Jesus, the real hero of Acts, is writing the 29th Chapter through willing disciples, even here in Belgium. As Lloyd John Ogilvie says, “The abrupt ending leaves us with the challenge and opportunity to allow the Spirit to write the next chapter of the Book of Acts today, in and through us” (page 357, below reference).

May God help us to write well, with a bold and faithful witness of lives filled with and controlled by the Holy Spirit. May we trust that God will be with us as we keep on fighting the good fight and finishing the race of faith marked out for us! May our “Acts 29” chapter please and honor the Author of the greatest story ever told!

Thoughts and questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:

1. Why do you think that Luke ended Acts so abruptly?
2. How do you think God continues to write his story of his kingdom and of His Son?
3. What do you think is your role in God’s writing his “final chapter”?
4. Who are the people in your life with whom you might share the story of Jesus?
5. How would you describe the boldness of Paul and the other apostles in Acts?
6. In what way is the message of Christ unhindered, even in countries where the proclamation of the gospel is forbidden?
7. What role does suffering play in our witness for Christ? Is suffering necessary for the sake of the gospel?

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