

NOTICE: For technical reasons beyond our control, today's sermon is available only in text form. We apologize for the inconvenience.

Acts 28:17-31

Last year, the final installment of the Star Wars movie series premiered to let's say, mixed reviews. Mixed reviews have been common all the films of the current trilogy, and some movie goers and critics loved Rise of Skywalker, which serves as the final film, not only of the current trilogy, but really, the grand finale of the beloved original trilogy and the not as beloved prequel trilogy. Tying together decades worth of stories, with all their renowned characters, to try and satisfy a very rabid and hard to please core audience – was a huge task for director JJ Abrams. Some think he accomplished the mission and provided an epic conclusion. Others think that Rise of Skywalker was a dud – lots of those hard to please fans, proved to be hard to please.

Composing an ending, for a movie or a work of literature – pretty much any kind of writing can be difficult. The author and poet, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow once said, “Great is the art of beginning, but greater is the art of ending.” Why all this talk about endings? Well, we have done it – this morning, we have reached the end of the book of Acts, and there are some who read its ending and come away saying, “Luke, is that all? Did the dog eat the rest of your manuscript?”

Why might some folks react that way? Think of where the story of Acts has appeared to be barreling towards – where does it look like Luke has been taking us from chapter 21 onward? Luke was telling us about Paul's journey to Rome – and we saw last week that Paul made it. God kept His word to Paul. But, what do we think is going to come next? How do we think Luke is going to end Acts? We've seen Paul testify before all kinds of authority figures – Jewish religious rulers, Jewish governors, Jewish kings, Roman rulers. Luke showed us in vivid detail the sea voyage and all the trouble Paul endured to arrive at Rome – from storm, to shipwreck, to snake bite.

Most people figure, and its hard to blame them, that the book of Acts was going to end with Paul testifying before Caesar. And we'd discover – would Caesar finally administer justice for Paul – would he render that not guilty verdict, and then Luke would give us the end scene of Paul walking away a free man – validated, vindicated – personally yes, but also that would be an incredible stamp of seeming approval of Paul's faith. Or, perhaps we would see that Caesar would go the way of all the other earthy rulers that Paul stood before – and he'd fail to administer justice. For whatever reason, despite all the evidence in Paul's favor, Caesar would render a guilty verdict, and the book of Acts would end on a somber note, with Paul's execution. But, through that, Luke would show us how Paul was a martyr for his faith. That even though, Caesar could kill Paul's body, he could not separate Paul from the love of God.

But, Luke does not end the book of Acts with Paul testifying before Caesar – so the question is why not? The most likely reason is that Luke finished writing the book of Acts before Paul ever appeared before Caesar. However, that causes us to ask – why didn't Luke wait until after Paul's trial to complete Acts? It isn't as if Luke was under a deadline from his publisher. Why not wait?

Now, if we, and I hope we do, take the perspective on the Scriptures, that the Scriptures takes – that is that the Bible is the inspired, written Word of God. That as Paul says in 2 Timothy that the Bible is “God breathed.” Yes, the Scriptures are penned by human men, such as Luke, but the words that they write came from the Spirit of God. Why did the Spirit of God author this ending for the book of Acts? What does God want us to come away thinking, believing, doing after we read this abrupt, unexpected conclusion?

*[17] After three days he called together the local leaders of the Jews, and when they had gathered, he said to them, “Brothers, 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] When they had examined me, they wished to set me at liberty, because there was no reason for the death penalty in my case. [19] But because the Jews objected, I was compelled to appeal to Caesar—though I had no charge to bring against my nation. [20] For this reason, therefore, I have asked to see you and speak with you, since it is because of the hope of Israel that I am wearing this chain.” [21] And they said to him, “We have received no letters from Judea about you, and none of the brothers coming here has reported or spoken any evil about you. [22] But we desire to hear from you what your views are, for with regard to this sect we know that everywhere it is spoken against.”*

Here we see that Paul maintained the same overall strategy while in Rome that he utilized throughout his entire ministry. What was it? That Paul would proclaim the gospel to all – beginning first with Jews and then to Gentiles also. After spending only three days in Rome, Paul organized a meeting with local Jewish leaders. And we see that Paul again testifies to Jewish people as he has previously. He speaks about his innocence of any wrongdoing against the Jews – who he calls his brothers. Again, Paul says that his trouble exists not because he is attacking Jewish customs or faith, but because he is proclaiming the hope of Israel. The coming of their messiah and his resurrection.

And these Roman Jews, surprisingly, tell Paul that they actually hadn’t heard about him – that the leaders in Judea never sent word one way or another about Paul. While this is surprising, considering the vitriol the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem had for Paul, the Roman Jews are likely telling the truth here. This is yet another indication that the charges against Paul were flimsy and not likely to produce a guilty verdict against him in the end. It appears that the cost of formally continuing a case against Paul wasn’t worth it to the leaders in Judea. However, while the Roman Jewish leaders didn’t know about Paul, they knew about his faith – they knew that the sect that he belonged to was spoken against everywhere. But, they agree to learn more about the Christian faith and have a second meeting with Paul. Let’s see what Paul tells them.

*[23] When they had appointed a day for him, they came to him at his lodging in greater numbers. From morning till evening he expounded to them, testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus both from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets. [24] And some were convinced by what he said, but others disbelieved.* When Paul has this large, captive audience of Roman Jews what is his emphasis? The kingdom of God. This is crucial to helping us understand why Luke ends the book of Acts the way in which he does, as we will see the centrality of the proclamation of the kingdom of God, in the final verse of the book.

So, what is the kingdom of God? For a lot of us, when we hear kingdom of God, we think about heaven. We think about something that for us is totally in the future. But, heaven is only a fraction of what the Bible means when it talks about the kingdom. Others, when they think of the kingdom, think about God’s sovereign rule over all of creation. And that is part, but even that does not fully cover what the kingdom of God encompasses. Paul indicates that the topic of the kingdom permeates all of the Scriptures, he was expounding the Old Testament – the Law and the Prophets – and that Jesus is the focal point of the kingdom.

Again, Jesus is Israel’s hope. He is the long awaited Messiah, and his coming ushers in the kingdom of God – that is God’s promised rule through His anointed one – one who is of the lineage of Israel’s King David – the son, promised by God, to sit on the throne forever. Patrick Schriener, in his book “The Kingdom of God and the Glory of the Cross” gives a helpful definition of the kingdom of God – he says the kingdom is “the King’s power over the King’s people in the King’s place.” Jesus the Messiah is the King’s power, and he rules over His people, who are all those who have faith in him – Jew and Gentile alike – in the King’s place,

which is more than heaven, but the King's realm extends to heaven and to earth as well. As the Lord taught his disciples to pray regarding the kingdom 'let your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.' We'll address the kingdom a bit more when we come to the end of today's message.

Notice here that Paul's preaching about King Jesus and the kingdom gathers a mixed response by this Jewish audience. This mixed reaction recalls another similar episode in Acts 13, when there Paul preaches at a synagogue in Antioch where the people are divided. In both cases, some of the Jewish people come to faith in Christ, but others reject Paul's message. Also, in both cases, Paul quotes from the prophet Isaiah to make his point clear. In Acts 13, Paul quotes from Isaiah 49:6, "I have made you a light to the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth." A prophecy about the servant of the Lord, who both restores Israel and brings salvation to the nations – that's kingdom talk. What does Paul say to the Roman Jews in our passage?

*[25] And disagreeing among themselves, they departed after Paul had made one statement: "The Holy Spirit was right in saying to your fathers through Isaiah the prophet:*

*[26] "Go to this people, and say,  
"You will indeed hear but never understand,  
and you will indeed see but never perceive."*

*[27] For this people's heart has grown dull,  
and with their ears they can barely hear,  
and their eyes they have closed;  
lest they should see with their eyes  
and hear with their ears  
and understand with their heart  
and turn, 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 listen."*

Paul here references from Isaiah 6, and we heard a bit more of the surrounding verses of this in our Scripture reading earlier, and we hear that Isaiah was called to a ministry that would result in the hardening, the blinding, the deafening of Israel, but while judgment would come upon the people for their stubbornness – remnant would remain faithful, "a holy seed like a single stump in a decimated forest."

The kingdom of God came through this faithful remnant – a remnant whittled down to but one – Jesus Christ. Paul makes this clear in his letter to the Romans – how the whole world is consigned under the dominion of sin. How all born in Adam inherit his sin nature, following his fall. And how all people – Jews, who possessed God's Law and Gentiles who did not – all fell short of God's perfect standard of righteousness. All but Jesus Christ, he born humanly speaking out of the line of David, but conceived by the Holy Spirit. Jesus alone was born without the stain of original sin, and Jesus never committed a single sin in his life. He always lived for His Father, obeying His Father, and through that perfect, perpetual obedience – Jesus was fit to be an acceptable sacrifice for our sin. He took our sin upon himself and had the full wrath of God, the punishment we all deserve, on the cross. And he imputed to all who have faith in him – his perfect righteousness – salvation has come through the remnant, the holy seed, and salvation has gone out from the Jews to the Gentiles, to the ends of the earth.

Paul declared the even the stubbornness of Israel would not prevent God from keeping His promise. God's kingdom would come. In fact, it would be through Israel's hardening, that the Gentiles would be brought in as equals, as fellow heirs. Now, let's consider the abrupt, surprising end to Acts.

*[30] He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, [31] proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.*

Why didn't Luke end with the aftermath of Paul's going before Caesar? Because ultimately the book of Acts is about more than the Apostle Paul. It's about more than Peter or any Apostle. The book of Acts is about Jesus, about what he continued to do and teach through the Apostles. To really grasp the ending, lets go back to the question posed by the apostles to the risen Jesus in Acts 1:6, they asked "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" This is a good question – the disciples perceived that Jesus was the Messiah and that through him the kingdom would come. But, they didn't grasp exactly how and when the kingdom would come in its fullness.

Jesus has ushered the kingdom of God into the here and now, through his life, death and resurrection. And at the exact time, known and set by the Father alone, Jesus will consummate His kingdom, as he will rule over his people in his realm, which will be the new heavens and new earth. The theme of the kingdom begins and closes the book of Acts. Luke knew what he was doing, as he followed the Spirit's lead in composing this book.

The ending of Acts shows us how the kingdom comes in the here and now. It comes through the Spirit empowered proclamation and teaching that Jesus is Lord. The kingdom comes by God working through people like Paul, who at the end of Acts was still under house arrest, guarded, perhaps even chained – given some slack, but by no means free. Paul's body had limitations – all of our bodies have limitations in this world, but his witness was welcoming, bold, unhindered.

What Luke wants us to realize at the end of Acts is that the story isn't over – that it is more appropriate to attach the words "to be continued" instead of "the end" to this book. God's story doesn't come to a close when Paul's story does, no – God invites everyone who follows the Lord Jesus to participate in His story. As we live as subjects of the kingdom of God right now, God is at work in us and through us and His grace and His mercy and His justice and His love and His peace are displayed. God's kingdom becomes more visible in the here and now through our witness to our King. God is writing the next chapter of Acts through the subjects of His unhindered kingdom.

**Benediction:** To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.