

At the Ends of the Earth

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[0 : 00] It's recording now. Let's pray together. Father God, thank you so much for the opportunity we have as your people to gather tonight under! the teaching of your word. And we pray that by your spirit you would give us hearts and minds! That are ready to receive from you and be shaped by you. Lord Jesus, there's nothing more we want than to know you better tonight. And so we pray in your kindness, you would help us to do just that. And we ask these things in your name. Amen.

But all the way back at the beginning of the book of Acts where we've been in our evening services, Luke, who is the writer of the book, records the risen Lord Jesus meeting regularly with the apostles. If you want, you can flick back to Acts chapter 1 with me. I'm going to do a little bit of flicking tonight, I'm afraid. Acts chapter 1, the risen Lord Jesus meeting regularly with the apostles. And on what was to be their final occasion together, Luke records Jesus as speaking the following words in verse 8. I'll read them for us. Here's what Jesus said.

There we are. Two key promises from the Lord Jesus as the book of Acts gets underway. Number one, that the Holy Spirit will come in power. Did it happen? Yes. Acts chapter 2. Refresh yourself on that later. And then number two, that those gathered before him as he was speaking would be the witnesses to Jesus locally, nationally and internationally. The gospel is going to go global. After Jesus has spoken these words in verse 8, he is taken up to heaven and that's where the narrative of Acts really gets underway. It begins in earnest as Luke writes to show us how these two promises, the coming of the Spirit and the going global of the gospel, are and are going to be fulfilled and were fulfilled.

And as the book has unfolded, if you've been with us regularly on Sunday evenings, you'll have noticed that there are quite a lot of axy things that happen as Luke takes us on this tour of the ancient Near East. Lots of axy kinds of things. First of all, there are converts and those converts are Jews and Gentiles. They're men and women. They're rich and poor. They're slave and free. That's very axish. There's opposition to, as well as lots of enthusiasm for the gospel. There are prison cells and impossible escapes from prison. There are painful and very public executions of some believers.

There are powerful miracles. There are inexplicable healings. And there is plenty of persuasive preaching and impressive teaching. As well as, and this is very axy, lots of just ordinary conversations between scholars and magicians, with centurions, with eunuchs. There is joy, as you go through the book, in liberation from legalism and in liberation from paganism.

[3 : 27] But there are also hardened hearts. And at the end of the book, where we find ourselves this evening, these axy kind of things continue. Once again, see some significant events that appear to have the potential to damage God's plans, to do what Jesus said he would in Acts chapter 1 verse 8. Events that could damage those plans. And that are recorded for us events that demonstrate that nonetheless, God does exactly what he says he will do. And it seems to me that that is just what Luke wants us to see as he writes this book for his friend Theophilus, and which we have the privilege of reading here and now. He wants us to see that the promises made by Christ in Acts chapter 1 will be fulfilled, and that we, as ordinary disciples, are privileged to have a part to play in that.

There are just two things I want to draw out this evening, and I'll draw them across the whole two chapters that were read for us by Innes. And they're set out for you in your order of service, which you can keep for posterity, sell it on Vinted in the future when it's worth something.

Firstly, the theme of fulfilment, that God does what he says he will do. And secondly, the theme of discipleship, how Luke fleshes out for Theophilus, his original reader, and so for us now too, what it looks like to be a natural witness to the Lord Jesus. And as we get to that heading, we're going to look at three particular portraits of Paul that Luke gives us by way of illustration.

So those points are in your service sheet, and I hope it'll be helpful for you to have them in front of you and to have the chapters in front of you too as we work through them together. So here we are then. If you've been in Acts chapter 1 verse 8, you're now welcome to flick back to chapter 27. And as Innes read for us, I'm sure you notice that we have left very suddenly that slow drama of the various tribunals that Paul has had to appear before.

The legal remedies that were available to him locally, they have now all been exhausted. And Paul has exercised his right of appeal to Rome, to Caesar. And so to Rome, Paul must go.

[5 : 54] There was no ancient equivalent when Paul made that appeal as a prisoner of G4S. And so Paul and a number of other prisoners of Rome are passed into the custody of a Roman centurion. Get his name in the opening of chapter 27, a chap named Julius. And it's with that the journey to the heart of the Roman Empire begins. Along with Paul and his journey in the opening verses of 27, we learn that Luke, the writer, is also with them. He's maybe there acting as the ship's medic. And their fellow friend, Aristarchus, is also on board. And the route they will take across the Mediterranean is perhaps novel to us. But for them, it was a route well travelled. It followed the ancient grain routes that were used to get grain from across the colonies back into the Roman state to feed the eternal city.

So a route well travelled, you may think. A route perhaps safer to go on. But the time of departure is risky. Winter is coming. And with it, storms. It is important then for Paul and the other passengers that their pace of travel is fast. But fast it is certainly not. The weather is against our sailors.

They make slow progress. They lose time. And they arrive at a place called Fairhavens in verse 8 of chapter 27. And it's there, at Fairhavens, that the key question arises. Do we continue?

Should we keep going at this time? Look again, well, look with me at verse 10. We didn't read it this evening, but I'll read it for us. Chapter 27, verse 10. Here are Paul's prescient words in Fairhavens as they consider whether or not to continue their voyage. He says this, Men, I can see our voyage is going to be disastrous and bring great loss to ship and to cargo and to our own lives also. Paul was a seasoned traveller by now. He'd pottered about the Mediterranean, clocked up the air miles as he'd taken the gospel out from Jerusalem to the Gentile world. And as a result, he would have known all too well a little bit about sailing conditions, what it meant to travel at the right time in the Mediterranean. And so he knew that their crossing at this time of year was going to be fraught with issues. And so he speaks as he does in verse 10.

However, we read in verses 11 and 12 that the centurion Julius prefers the view of the ship's captain and owner. They leave Fairhavens and trouble arrives. And how right Paul was. As you cast your eye down over the verses that Innes read for us in chapter 27, you'll no doubt agree that it's plain Luke is not writing to commend the merits of a Mediterranean cruise. Quite the opposite.

[9 : 03] The drama of verses 13 to 44 is remarkable. This is a ship with 276 passengers. This isn't a dinghy going to the Isle of Butte. This is a big boat with big important stuff on it, grain for the empire.

And that boat, that ship is entirely out of control. It's at the mercy of the elements. It's constantly dark, Luke records, making navigation back then near impossible. The crew, the passengers are hungry. The boat is so pummeled by waves that its very structure is at risk of falling apart. And those on board are afraid. They are far from land. And who knows when or if they'll actually ever make land again? And for those who are remanded in custody, like Paul, the threat of death is constantly dangling over their heads. Better a dead prisoner than an escaped prisoner in the Roman economy.

And so the questions begin, will the ship make it? And more importantly, is Paul going to make it? Paul in weather, obstinate crew, murderous soldiers, everything stacked against Paul and Luke and Aristarchus.

And what a relief that would have been, I think, to those who had schemed and contrived to be rid of Paul, where he'd just become another sort of Mediterranean fatality statistic, a victim of poor shipping choices.

What a relief to them who had opposed Paul and his ministry to think of the end of Paul and the end, too, then, of this Jesus sect problem. Now, it's against this impossible set of circumstances, this difficult background, that I want us to draw out that theme of fulfillment, which makes up our first heading.

[10 : 54] Firstly, I think we see it in promises that are specifically made to Paul. A promise made that he would survive the storm and that he would make it to Rome.

Back in Acts chapter 23, for context, Paul is told by the Lord Jesus, during a particularly stormy meeting of the Sanhedrin, a religious tribunal, that he is going to go to Rome.

And that's what's going to happen no matter what. And that, at the time, was an encouragement and a promise made to Paul. Take courage, the Lord Jesus says, as he testified about me in Jerusalem, so, too, must you testify about me in Rome.

And in our text this evening, that same promise is repeated. Verse 24 of chapter 27. Paul, you will go to Rome. Do not be afraid, Paul.

You must stand trial before Caesar, and God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you. All will be saved.

[12 : 00] Keep courage. Trust the Lord. Only the ship will be destroyed. What happens next? The ship runs the ground on Malta. Lucky them, there's a Debenhams in Malta.

All are saved. Fulfillment. God does what he says he will do. So, we survive the shipwreck, promise one. Promise two comes from earlier in Acts, once again, in Acts chapter 9.

And it's there, and Paul is tasked by the Lord Jesus specifically to go to the Gentiles. And as Paul settles into his Roman Airbnb, to the Gentiles, Paul has very much come.

Rome is a hub of politics, of engineering, philosophy, science, religion, power, economics. It was the access point to the rest of the world, so strategically important for getting the gospel to the Gentiles, which was Paul's God-given task.

But when God's appointed witness to the Gentiles, when Paul himself, of all people, rocks up in Rome, of all places, it's a serious demonstration not only of God's commitment to graft the Gentiles into his kingdom, but also a sign, I think, of God's generosity.

[13 : 18] A people not chosen by him. God owed the Gentiles nothing. A people not chosen by him. Not partied to the rich provision of God in history, as the Jews were, as a set-apart people.

Nonetheless, a people who God has chosen, who Christ has chosen, in his loving kindness, for the gospel to be shared with. A remarkably generous thing for Paul to come to Rome, at God's hand, to share the gospel with people like us.

People who, we read in verse 28 of chapter 28, surprisingly unlike the Jews, were eager to listen, ready to receive. Luke was clearly less shocked about the fulfilment thing than I was, because he just simply writes, and so we came to Rome.

That was it. Gentry 8, verse 14, Luke says, and so we came to Rome. Significant moment, though, not for Luke and his narrative, but for us reading it. Does Paul survive the shipwreck then?

Yes. Does Paul make it to Rome? Yes. Has witness through Paul come to the Gentiles? Yes. Is God generous then? Yes. God does what he says he will do. And such fulfilment, as we thought about a little earlier, didn't look hopeful.

[14 : 40] It's incredible to consider that what was meant for Paul's harm, and it was meant for his harm and the gospel's harm, by being arrested and dragged before the authorities and the legal apparatus of the day, what was meant for his harm and the gospel's demise, what was meant to cut the head off the strange Judean cult led by this guy Jesus, it turns out was used by God for his glory and for our good.

And we've seen that before in the scriptures. That's the very Bible thing, not just an Axish thing. It's God's way then. It's God's way now.

And it always confounds expectations. What a shock, I imagine, for Paul's prosecutors, when they rocked up in Rome eventually, to discover that not only had Paul survived the dangerous crossing, not only was he living under a very gentle and easy guard, he was also proclaiming, without hindrance, the very gospel that they were trying to stop him from telling people about.

And where was he doing it? He was doing it at the heart of the empire. It's remarkable. What was meant for harm, God used for his glory and for our good.

Two comments then on this big idea of God doing what he says he will. The first is this. Luke's record of Paul's work at the end of his book is, I think, both an encouragement and a challenge to us.

[16 : 14] How will we, as fellow disciples, fare in the opportunities that come our way as we partake in that same gospel witness? And how will we fare when the hindrances come too, and they will?

Luke has set out so plainly that God does what he says he will. And so we then know of God's character that he is both reliable and trustworthy.

And those are two qualities, sometimes all too rare in people, and yet both integral to God's very nature, how different he is. And so if we find ourselves hindered in our witness at home, or at work, or with our friends and family, if we feel let down by God's people, such that our desired, proclaimed Christ has fallen flat, or if we feel the task just to live and serve the Lord Jesus feels impossible, then I like to think that Luke here is inviting us to come once again to the one whose unchanging character is sufficient for all of those things, all of those things, because he is consistently reliable, he is consistently trustworthy.

And so there is no one better to supply what is lacking in you, so that he might afford you and I the privilege of being used by him in the fulfilment of these same promises.

It's a wonderful thing. So it's an encouragement and a challenge. The second comment is this, that because Paul, and it might feel like a stretch, but I want to say, because Paul made it to Rome, we're gathered here tonight in St Silas in similar weather conditions.

[17 : 57] Good grief. It's sweaty. Who wore a white t-shirt? We're gathered this evening in St Silas. St Silas, we're Gentiles, and we're from all nations.

And that's a remarkable event. The fruit of God's promises and acts are evident in the diversity of our own church family here at St Silas, Sunday by Sunday, and in the global church family that we are part of.

I was thinking of this, that each Sunday I come here, I am lovingly mocked by a Nigerian friend. I laugh with a new Filipino friend. I come to church with my Korean wife. I help with roots on Thursdays.

And I'm blessed by the ever happy and growing group of Hong Kongers there. Our adopted student at St Silas is Malaysian, my godson's brother who comes to St Silas. His parents are Singaporean and Malaysian.

My younger brother in the Lord is a Hong Konger here who's married to a Singaporean. I sit on a planning group with a very efficient American. A member of my growth group is Finnish.

[18 : 57] Our church planter is Australian. And there's even someone in our growth group from Edinburgh. And so if we want to know if God has kept that promise in Acts chapter 1 verse 8, we need only look around.

He's done it. He's doing it. To all nations, the gospel has gone. What a privilege to be part of such a diverse and wonderful family.

And to all nations, the gospel is going. Those conspiring to bring Paul down, whether people or creation or the devil himself couldn't stop it. Nothing can.

Not the gates of hell. Another promise. Another fulfillment. Now if God is in the business of fulfilling promises, which I hope you've seen a little bit of in our text this evening, the next question is how then should we live?

And it's been Luke's pattern throughout Acts to show us what life looks like as a disciple of Jesus. And the end of the book I don't think is any different in this regard.

[20 : 03] I want to say that Luke gives us at least three sketches of Paul to show us the way of discipleship as that gospel message continues to go out.

And the first sketch is this. It's of Paul, the relationship builder. I think across these last two chapters, as with the whole book, we get a real sense of the character of Paul.

And here, especially, we see him as Winsome. He has clearly, I think, built some sort of rapport with Julius the centurion such that he is, on more than one occasion, permitted to leave his custodial area and go out and visit his friends and be looked after by fellow believers during the time when the ship is in harbour.

He's also been invited to be part of that key discussion about continuing the journey to Italy in 27 verse 10. And he is listened to when there is a risk that the crew will desert the ship in 27 verses 31 to 32.

His life is spared by the centurion when the soldiers was to kill those under their guard. When people needed encouragement, Paul literally told them to take courage.

[21 : 16] He spoke words of warmth to them. And when they were hungry, what to do? He passed the sourdough. When he arrives in Rome, he invites people over for a pizza. And the people Paul was with then noticed something different about that, something natural about his way.

And it gave them pause for thought. And whilst Paul's circumstances were certainly remarkable, Paul's actions were entirely ordinary.

People I found when they were talking about the workplace on a Monday morning when I was a student and they were preaching always spoke about conversations around a water cooler. I've been in the workplace for over a decade and I've never once found a water cooler.

And if there is one, there's certainly no one chatting around it. It's not what happens. And so we think all evangelical witness in the workplace is attached to this mysterious water cooler.

Whereas in reality, Paul's example here is saying just be natural. Be your natural Christian self. Think about the way you send your emails. Think about the conversations you have tomorrow morning with colleagues as they come into the office or the ward, wherever you may be.

[22 : 30] Paul's actions, although he was in remarkable circumstances, were just quite normal, quite natural. He chatted to people, built them up in the Lord, ensured needs were met.

It was just his natural Christian self and that was it. And what did God do with that? Lots. He used it all for his glory. Where we are liberated by the gospel as Paul was, to just be your natural Christian self, we don't need to wait for that special event, that special week, that special moment.

Whether our lives are as mundane as mine are, or as exciting as Paul's was, it matters not one bit in the Lord's economy. where we live in the ordinary moments for Jesus, building relationships in a natural way, then God will use all of that.

So number one, Paul sketched as the relationship builder, Paul just being natural. The second portrait is this. It's of Paul picking up sticks.

We didn't read these verses so we'll look at them again just now. It's in chapter 28 and it's verses 1 to 3. Once safely on shore, Luke writes, we found out that the island was called Malta.

[23 : 55] The islanders showed us unusual kindness. They built a fire and welcomed us all because it was raining and cold. Paul gathered a pile of brushwood and, as he put it on the fire, a viper, driven out by the heat, fastened itself on his hands.

Now, here he is, Paul. Top man Paul, God's chosen vessel to take the gospel to the Gentiles. He's a Pharisee of Pharisees. He was a great student of Nunderland and Gamaliel.

He was even a Roman citizen. He had an enviable LinkedIn profile. And he's collecting firewood in the rain. With each stick collected, I think a line has been drawn between what Paul believes and how he lives.

Paul's life and doctrine line up. And I think we must not underestimate the incredible impact on gospel credibility by such ordinary, natural, Christian service, both between believers and also to those who know nothing of Christ.

And why is that? Well, this is where the rubber hits the road, certainly for me, maybe for you as well, because you and I, as Christians, can watch all the right YouTube content.

[25 : 14] And there is plenty YouTube content to watch. We can listen to the best and the latest podcast from the Gospel Coalition or wherever it is you get your Christian podcast.

We can adorn our bookcases with Tim Keller or John Piper. We can even attend every Cornhill Training Day or UCCF event. We can be on the vestry or the CU committee or serve on a Keswick team or an SU holiday.

It doesn't matter what mainly music songs you know the words to or how many rotas your name is on, because if we have all the time for the evangelical round or knowing all the right answers, but our lives do not match our doctrine because we're too busy elsewhere, we're too important to serve, we can't clear the chairs, we couldn't possibly serve on that water for tea and coffee, we couldn't visit someone who's hurting, we don't have time to send a WhatsApp to somebody in need this week or to catch up relationally or to say hello to that person standing on their own at the end of the service, then some may be forgiven for thinking there's absolutely nothing credible about the Gospel whatsoever.

I find that to be immensely challenging. Some may be forgiven for thinking that we do not know the Lord Jesus at all. We can speak all his words but we cannot live his way.

Paul picking up sticks. It's natural, ordinary service, life, doctrine, lining up. A number of years ago I remember being in church as a student up in Costa del Aberdeen and going after the service, might have been morning, might have been evening, I can't remember, I'm too old.

[27 : 11] And I was shocked to see after the service going into the kitchen that the person with their elbows deep in the water at the sink with the marigolds on was none other than the minister.

Whoa! The minister was doing the dishes. That's not a jive at you, Tim, don't worry. The minister was doing the dishes. He was doing the clearing up. For me, a lasting connection at that time was drawn between the doctrine this guy taught and he taught great doctrine, he still does.

Really helpful stuff. But the credibility of that teaching came not just from what he said, it came from how he lived. Life and doctrine.

Paul picked up sticks. That minister did the washing up. others put the chairs away or send a WhatsApp or greet somebody on a Sunday morning. Whatever it is, let your life speak.

Serve one another. That's sketch number two from Luke. Thirdly and finally, Luke shows us Paul sharing the gospel.

[28 : 18] To the Gentiles, there was to be a witness. Paul hasn't disappointed us in that regard. And the final section of the book, and it was read for us this evening in 17 to 31 of chapter 28, sets up what that looks like in practice.

Discussions were held with the local Jewish leaders with a view to persuading them in verse 23 about Jesus. And there is both encouragement and challenge in verse 24.

I wonder if you noticed that. Some believed, some didn't. It's always the pattern. Paul knew it, Jesus knew it, and he said as much, didn't he? Some seed fell on good ground, some seed falls on bad ground.

Regardless, just sow the seed, sow the seed. Those are normal responses to the gospel. Some believe, some didn't. And Paul spends the next two years doing just that, proclaiming the kingdom of God, teaching about the Lord Jesus with all boldness and without hindrance.

There is a contrast maybe between what we see of Paul here in 17 to 31, and the servant Paul picking up sticks in the earlier part of chapter 28.

[29 : 29] Both are normal, both are necessary. Interestingly, Luke doesn't record any of Paul's teaching moments on Malta, and Paul was there for three months, so that is unusual, that's different.

He simply records how Paul served there. And then in Rome, we are back in the axis pattern of here's what Paul was saying, here's who he was saying it to, here's how it was received by those who heard it.

I think Luke is saying, well, both are necessary then, both are necessary. In the life of the ordinary Christian, we let our lives speak by how we serve, and we share our hope with words.

Words and actions, life and doctrine, both matter. In practice, that might look like something as natural as being a respected colleague at work and sharing what you believe when the opportunity arises.

It's as ordinary as being a reliable friend and sharing what you believe when opportunities present themselves. Your actions and your words, let your hope be known, speak the gospel.

- [30 : 37] Three pictures then of Paul as the narrative of Acts draws to a close. And I don't know if you thought this too, but I certainly thought it was a bit of an unusual ending to the book.
- We've had a lot of detail over the last few chapters, for example, about Paul's legal headaches and court appearances. And then we don't get told what happens next.
- What happened to Paul? When was his appeal heard? Who heard it? What did they say? What did the prosecutors say? Did they arrive? What was the conclusion? We don't know.
- In fact, we don't even have a biblical record of what ultimately happens to Paul. Paul. It's an unusual ending. But I suppose that might be Luke's way of showing us that from start to finish.
- Acts was never really all about Paul, though Paul has a part to play in it. Instead, it's about the Lord Jesus and him showing us how the promise given at the start of the book in Acts chapter 1 is fulfilled by the end and goes on being fulfilled with every gospel conversation, every ordinary act of service, every relationship built.
- [31 : 47] It's all about Jesus. As we close, I like to imagine Stephen. What a chap. We met him back in Acts chapter 7.
- I don't know if you remember much of him. He was proclaiming the gospel to some Jews. They didn't like what they heard. More than that, they were angry, very angry. They'd pick up the stones and they stone him to death.
- Standing nearby was Paul, then Saul, his persecutor. Stephen is taken up to glory. He's received by the Lord Jesus and Paul in his time is taken up to glory too.
- And I like to think of Stephen in eternity having a chat with Paul over a flat white. They'll be in heaven as well, the flat whites.
- And Stephen, as he sips his flat white, turns to his persecutor, now brother, and says, did it work out? Did it work out in the end? The Acts chapter 1 stuff, did it work out?
- [32 : 49] I wasn't there. I don't know. And maybe Paul puts down his pastry and he simply gestures towards the crowds around him and says to Stephen, well what do you think?
- Take a look. Take a look. Every tribe, every tongue, every nation gathered to worship the Lord Jesus from Korea to Kazakhstan, Brazil to Burundi, France to the Philippines, Malaysia to Mexico, Hong Kong, Haiti, Edinburgh, Glasgow.
- The gospel has gone. The gospel is still going. God does what he says he will do and we with Paul all have the privilege of playing a part in that and always under the care of our loving, good, promise-keeping Lord Jesus.
- We're going to pray and then we might sing. We are going to sing. Thank you.