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Acts 28:16-31

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The Never Ending Story

SERIES: *Acts: The Rest of the Story*

On November 10, 1944, the dark cloud that hovered over London seemed more oppressive than ever. Hitler's forces had invaded the English skies and all of Britain was feeling the dread of its menacing shadow. Air raid sirens interrupted the blacked-out nights and frayed the nerves of the men, women and children that scurried like mice into the various shelters of the city. Then the bombs would come, one after another, whistling in the night, shaking the ground beneath as they clung to each other for comfort and protection. How long could they endure this unrelenting attack? When would darkness melt into day? Winston Churchill wished he could answer these questions. What could he say that would lend hope to his nation's dwindling courage? On that gloomy day, at the Mayor's Day Luncheon, Churchill addressed his audience with these immortal words: "Now this is not the end," he said. "It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning."

How accurately these words fit the final scene in the book of Acts. The church's beginning, with its setbacks and struggles, is ending, but by no means has its story ended. Do you remember where we began? It started in Jerusalem with a small band of followers, standing beside Jesus, their heads still spinning from His recent death and resurrection. Before He left, however, Jesus promised help in the form of the Holy Spirit who would empower their witness to the world. Then the Spirit descended like fire. And Peter and Stephen began preaching the good news throughout Jerusalem. "Jesus was alive; raised from the dead. God's kingdom had come indeed." It was an exciting time, a reviving time! Old and young alike were coming to Christ in droves. But soon terror, persecution and death would again walk alongside this toddling church like a bedfellow. And so it fled and spread with Philip to the outer regions of Samaria and Judea only to be hounded and tormented by a young Jewish zealot named Saul. . . until that blessed encounter along the Damascus Road. How ironic that God would choose this gunslinger as His evangelist, His instrument of grace to the world. Perhaps this is one of the lessons the book of Acts teaches us—our God acts in unexpected ways. In a dramatic turnaround Saul became Paul. The terrorist became an apostle who then carried the gospel message to the lands of Asia, Europe, and eventually Rome, the epicenter of the ancient world; a city of one million who had yet to hear the hope and promise of Christ. But before the curtain closes on Paul's ministry, let's turn to Acts 28 verse 16 and consider his current circumstances.

Luke writes, "When we entered Rome, Paul was

allowed to stay by himself, with the soldier who was guarding him." (Acts 28:16). In the beginning of this last scene we find the apostle not free to share the gospel. Instead he's confined to his apartment and chained to a Roman guard; probably not what he had in mind when he dreamed of going to Rome. For two years, he would be restricted to this room. How he must have longed for just one day's freedom to minister at the local marketplace, as he had done in the past. God, however, had other plans. In a way that makes no sense to us today, God intended to use Paul's limitations as a platform for the gospel message. The very shackles that restricted Paul's movement would be the medium for God's message of freedom. Isn't that great? In our lives, we often think God can't use us because we feel chained to some physical problem or confined to a situation we can't control. But it's in those times of weakness that God ministers most effectively through us . . . if we depend on Him. Our sufferings, like nothing else, provide the context out of which great creative energies flow. And when we add to that the operation of a sovereign God, One who intends to turn tragedies into triumphs, our limitations need not be objects of fear but, rather, opportunities for God to express His glory.

Nick Vujcic, the amazing limbless evangelist, is but one of countless examples we could pull from. God has used Nick's limitations to minister to over two million people in 19 nations, to literally be Christ's hands and feet to the world. How ironic! Then there is Joni Eareckson Tada, who was left paralyzed from the neck down after a diving accident. "Can God still use me, paralyzed?" she asked. "Can I, paralyzed, still worship and love Him? He has taught me that I can," she concluded. You see, God showed her, as He did Paul that His grace would see her through. In spite of Joni's paralysis or Nick's lack of limbs, God has used their limitations as a platform for ministry. And despite Paul's chains, God brought the people to him to hear the gospel preached.

In verses 17-22 Luke tells us that **"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. And when they had examined me, they were willing to release me because there was no ground for putting me to death. But when the Jews objected, I was forced to appeal to Caesar, not that I had any accusation against my nation. 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.' 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. 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,'" (Acts 28:17-22).

Whenever Paul came to a new city he always went to the Jews at the local synagogue first. In Rome, however, he had to invite the Jews to his apartment and they came willingly. Paul simply wanted to explain his situation. First, he pointed out that he had done nothing against the Jewish people. Secondly, he explained how after being arrested, the Romans could find nothing against him deserving death. And finally, that it was because of the Jewish objection to his release that he appealed to Caesar although he had nothing against his own people. This is amazing! As we have studied Acts we have seen how the Jews hounded Paul and caused trouble for him in virtually every city. They had falsely accused and incited riots against him, caused him to be stoned and almost scourged. But Paul speaks not one word of bitterness or indictment against them. He freely absolves them of any charge.

Paul then brought up the real issue behind his arrest and imprisonment. He tells them that, "I am wearing this chain," and we can imagine him raising his manacled wrists, "for the sake of the hope of Israel." It was because of his allegiance to the promised Messiah fulfilled in Christ that Paul was imprisoned. Once again we see how God uses our sufferings. We just made the point that our limitations, coupled with God's grace, actually empowers ministry. Now we are seeing that our sufferings authenticate it. Nothing proves the sincerity of our beliefs like our willingness to suffer for them. This speaks of the enormous cost involved in our commitment to Christ. Jesus never promised exemption from heartache and pain. Anyone who has ever been involved in outreach ministry knows how tough it can be. It demands a constant commitment to hang on, trusting God against a myriad of forces that would contend against us; to keep believing in Christ's sovereignty although things may be turning out differently from what we had planned; to press into His love so our hearts don't become jaded by circumstance; to forgive and keep forgiving when we've been insulted or falsely accused by another. This is not to say that ministry doesn't also contain great joy, blessings and a sense of God facilitating His purposes through us. It does! But like most things in life, it's a mixed bag. Paul, however, accepted his chains as part of his commission to Christ—that the messenger would, indeed, suffer for his master. So as a prisoner, Paul is pointing to what is true of every one of us—we are bound, we have been captured and taken hostage by the sovereign will of God, to carry the hope of Christ into whatever circumstances and regardless of cost. This is what Paul models for us here.

In response, these Jewish leaders conveyed a very diplomatic attitude. They denied any knowledge of Paul's case. His words, however, linking his

imprisonment with the "hope of Israel" had tickled their curiosity. So they agreed to meet with him further to hear his views. "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. Some were being persuaded by the things spoken, but others would not believe." (Acts 28:23).

In this verse we see both Paul's preaching method and message, how he taught and the content of what he had to say. His method of communicating was threefold: he "explained," he "testified," and he "persuaded." The Greek word for *explaining* means "to lay out or set forth." Luke used it to describe how Aquila and Priscilla pulled Apollos aside and "explained to him," in orderly sequence, "the way of God more accurately." So we can say that Paul communicated his message by laying out arguments accurately and in a systematic way, an ideal we can strive for when we're on the front lines of ministry. Secondly, Paul was "testifying," a word that means, "to declare emphatically." Luke doesn't tell us if Paul shared his testimony as he had done in previous occasions. But we can certainly imagine him pacing as he makes a key point, then standing square-shouldered as he resists a scoffer, or sitting on the edge of his seat as he focuses on a receptive listener. From morning and into the wee hours of the night, he was passionately engaged in a verbal battle for people's souls. Finally, his goal was to "persuade" them to respond. Paul was not just waxing philosophical or walking through an academic exercise. More than anything he wanted to effect a change. And because his arguments were grounded in "both the Law of Moses and the Prophets," he was teaching truths these Jews were already familiar with. He was speaking their language.

The content of his message was twofold. Paul spoke about the kingdom of God and Jesus, the Way to the heart of God. He probably communicated these themes in much the same way we would: by stressing God's sovereign rule over His created order; by explaining how man's rebellion in the garden effected all future generations; and how God through Jesus the Messiah atoned for that breach at Calvary. We can also assume that he concluded his discussion with an invitation, that through faith in Christ, God could and would deliver them "from the domain of darkness," and into "the kingdom of His beloved Son." By the end of the day he had, no doubt, created a mural of Christ—His mission, His crucifixion and His glory.

Wouldn't it be great to be a fly on the wall of this Bible study led by the apostle Paul? Who could have interpreted these scriptures more accurately than this former Pharisee who knew the Old Testament by heart. What compelling proof he had set before them. And yet their response is typical of Paul's audiences

throughout his ministry. Luke tells us that some were beginning to believe while others refused to. I doubt that this surprised Paul in the least. He knew, because of the black and white nature of the gospel, that conflict was inevitable. So while the friction between these groups heated up, rather than ignoring the spiritual battle by saying, "Hey fellas, let's just be friends and agree to disagree," Paul goes back to the foundation of the scriptures to mark where these Jews stood.

"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, 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; 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.' Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will also listen.' And when he had spoken these words, the Jews departed, having a great dispute among themselves," (Acts 28:25-29).

In one final attempt to shake these Jews from their slumber Paul applied these prophetic words from Isaiah. He was drawing from a passage that had predicted that people would deliberately close their minds to the truth of the gospel. This quotation draws a distinction between hearing and understanding, seeing and perceiving. It is quite possible for man to hear truth and yet fail to integrate it, possible to see and yet not perceive the spiritual realities underlying it. This text goes on to credit their lack of understanding to deliberately hardened hearts, deaf ears and closed eyes for otherwise they might turn and be saved. Jesus Himself used this passage in His last encounter with the Jews. And now, with a saddened heart, Paul is watching these Jews turn away in much the same way. Perhaps this is where Paul's words to the Corinthians, "We are destroying speculation and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God," meets its deepest evangelistic application.

How can they miss this? Paul hits them right between the eyes and they still don't get it. Yet what's happening here is no different from what occurs today. Many people view their spiritual and cultural relationships through a certain grid that tends to filter out those things that would demand change. They are trapped within what we might call "closed systems" where new revelation has little to no opportunity of getting through. We've all seen people like this. Perhaps at one point you too were unwilling to consider the possibility of needing a Savior to alter the train wreck your life had become. These systems are usually under girded by self-reliance and reinforced by our willful pride. The tragedy or blessing (depending on how we look at it) is that if we are living

within this kind of mind-set, we won't be able to receive the hope of Christ without it first shattering the self-centered principle upon which these systems rest. God makes that possible. Because our identities may be so tied to a false sense of self or distorted world-view, many would prefer to cling to the familiar but dead rags of the past than acknowledge that past as a lie.

Here again, we see that the Jews' deliberate rejection of Jesus in the past has rendered them incapable of believing in the present. They are still operating out of the same mindset. Nothing further can be said. In response Paul wanted them to know that God's salvation has been sent to the Gentiles; that they will listen with open ears, whereas the Jews had closed theirs. So if you are ever wondering why someone you are ministering to consistently refuses to receive the hope of Christ you need look no further than this text. On our side all we can do is put God's word on display as Paul has done in this passage, to be accepted or rejected. Then get out of the way and give God the room He needs to accomplish what only He can do.

In stark contrast to this warfare motif, the closing scene of Acts radiates with a sense of enduring hope. Having released these Jews to the path they had chosen, Paul then opens his heart to those who would receive: **"And (Paul) 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,"** (Acts 28:30-31). Here Luke is adding the finishing brush strokes to his portrait of Paul the evangelist. He doesn't tell us about what was going on with the Christians in Rome or Paul's eventual trial before Caesar. But he does paint a scenario of an open and hopeful ministry that we can apply to our own. Notice that Paul's door was open to anyone, regardless of class, ethnicity, religion or lack of religion, personal appearance or background. He never excluded others because they may have been different than he. The playing field was leveled. Anyone who was willing to hear about the kingdom of God and the Lord Jesus was welcomed in with open arms. The message of his life had boiled down to these two themes. If a prostitute came to see him, Paul probably talked about how they related to our brokenness; if a mother, how they applied to the family; if a runaway slave, how they dictated moral responsibility; if a philosopher, how they defined all of human existence.

Could you imagine being one of the Roman soldiers guarding Paul throughout those years and observing these interactions? I wonder how many of them begged Caesar to put them back on beat patrol. In another twist of irony his very keepers have been taken hostage, in a sense, to the gospel message. As Paul wrote to the Philippian believers, "Now I want

you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel, so that my imprisonment in the cause of Christ has become well known throughout the whole praetorian guard." Poor guy didn't stand a chance of going to hell! In addition, Paul used his circumstances as object lessons. We can imagine him reflecting on the reality of spiritual warfare. Glancing around the room, he may have focused on the soldier a few feet away, then penned those priceless words of Ephesians 6: "Put on the full armor of God . . ." Besides Ephesians, Paul wrote three other letters from this apartment: Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. He was making the best of a bad situation. But as the multitudes came to Paul, he taught and preached "with all openness, unhindered." These two words form a great picture that describes the freedom of the gospel message. Although the military scrutiny continued, there was no censor on Paul's preaching. He could be bold. He could be open. He wouldn't have to guard his words, overly concerned that someone might attack him. Instead, he could be vulnerable and warm, coming alongside those who longed to know his Lord. Though his hands were bound, his mouth was open for Christ. Though he was still chained to a Roman guard on a daily basis, the Word of God was not. Nor will it ever be!

Luke leaves us wondering what happened to Paul after his two-year house arrest. It appears that, in answer to the many prayers for his release, the Roman court may have acquitted him around 62 A.D. Being free once again, Paul may have taken the opportunity to preach Christ in Spain. He may have also visited his friend Philemon as he had promised in verse 22 of that letter. And despite having told the Ephesian elders that he would never see them again, it's possible that he would have stopped by Ephesus to commission Timothy as the church's pastor. We know that he traveled through Macedonia, writing his first letter to Timothy and taking Titus to Crete, where he left him to organize that island's ministry. From Crete, he would have sailed to Greece and written his letter to Titus while planning to spend the winter there.

In 64 A.D., however, Nero suddenly closed the door on religious freedom. He then blamed the Christians for the fire of Rome that he himself had ordered. As a result, a vicious persecution was ignited, and Paul was probably arrested and dragged to Rome as a prisoner. Having been deserted by most of his supporters and falsely accused by his enemies, Paul had little hope of a second acquittal. Tradition records that he was sentenced to the Mamertine prison, where he was eventually beheaded. Dying alone and as a criminal, Paul became like his Lord even in death. He had surrendered everything in service to Christ. In return, as F.B. Meyer wrote, "What a welcome he must have received (in heaven) from thousands whom he had turned from darkness to light, from the power of Satan unto God, and who were now to become his crown of rejoicing in the presence of the Lord! These from the highland of Galatia, and those from the seaboard of Asia Minor. These from Judaistic prejudice, and those from the depths of Gentile depravity and sin. These from the degraded slave

populations, and those from the ranks of the high-born and educated. Nor have such greetings ceased; but through all the centuries that have succeeded there are comparatively few that have passed along 'the Way to the Celestial City' who have not had to acknowledge a deep debt of gratitude to him who, of all others, was enabled to give a clearer apprehension of the Divine method of justifying and saving sinners" like us.

In closing I want to share a story. It's a story of God's activity in the life of a friend and fellow minister who passed away a few short months ago. Edmond Wong was a man many considered "the most powerful minister in San Francisco." This is not to say that he was "powerful" in his own strength but that the Lord used him in powerful ways. He was also a man who reflected Paul's great spirit of evangelism. But Edmond didn't fit the familiar pattern of any minister or social worker you may know. To my knowledge he had no paid staff; no sleekly monitored programs to outreach the lost. If you asked him about a five-year plan, or even a five-day plan, he would probably stare at you blankly. Nor was he one of those card-carrying repent or die evangelists with a John 3:16 placard hung around his neck. All Edmond did was care for and preach Christ to the city's drug addicted, AIDS infected homeless outcasts in desperate need of God's grace. This was a culture he was well acquainted with, having come out of a history of heroin addiction himself. And like Paul along the Damascus Road, God miraculously intervened one day, to usher in a new calling for his life. Being so affected by the radical nature of grace, Edmond preached boldly! And he preached ceaselessly! And yet he was not blessed, as we are, with a church building for a platform. Instead, he set up church at Boeddeker Park, in the very bowels of the city's tenderloin district and heart of enemy territory. Despite the elements—the wind, the rain and hecklers—Edmond's ministry dug what I would call "trenches for the Lord" every Tuesday, Friday and last Saturday of the month. On the Tuesday service, one week before the liver cancer took him home, Edmond said, "I believe the word of God touched many today. It was a bit tough on me physically though. I'm getting weaker, am not breathing well as the tumors are worse and still spreading. I sat to lead worship but stood to preach. God is good though!"

At his memorial service one of Edmond's three daughters paid tribute to her father by saying, "My dad wasn't only an amazing preacher and minister, he was also a wonderful husband and incredible father. But it was clear to all of us that he loved Jesus more. And he loved to tell others about the love of Jesus. And he loved it most when they were able to receive the love of Jesus. It was my dad's heart for the ministry in the park to keep on going. We plan on marching forward." Recently I received April's newsletter for the Lord's continued ministry at Boeddeker Park. It read,

"It was the last Saturday of March and time for God's work in the park. It was our first day of ministry without Edmond. Many brothers and sisters joined to support us in this day. The word of God was brought forth and many were blessed, touched and responded to receive prayer. We gave out over 200 lunches and bags of men and women's clothes. Perhaps Church in the Park will never be the same without our father, husband, and pastor, but if nothing else that Saturday was a testament of God's hand still moving in Boeddeker Park. Edmond's time may have passed but the work of the Lord is never done!"

Well, we began this morning by saying that, in the final verses of the book of Acts, the church's beginning, with its setbacks and struggles, is ending, but by no means has its story ended. As Christ promised, "I will build my church; and the gates of Hades shall not overpower it." So today, as the church is still being assaulted with bombs of cynicism, hatred and prejudice, the challenges are nowhere near over. They followed Paul wherever he went. They met Edmond at Boeddeker Park. And they will follow us as well. But we can ill afford to cower in the dark or run to the nearest air-raid shelter when things get tough. For God has called each of us, in some way, to the front lines of ministry. So before we say farewell to the apostle Paul, or to Edmond Wong for that matter, they passed something into our hands—the same torch they themselves had been carrying. Now it's our turn to carry the hope of Christ to the closest and remotest parts of the world. The Acts of the Apostles may have ended and yet its ongoing chapters are still being written—through us—on this very day.

So what does that look like? The truth is there are very few of us who are going to carry the hope of Christ to millions of people in 19 nations, or plant churches throughout Asia and Europe, or rub shoulders with the drug addicted masses lost within our cities streets. But that doesn't mean your ministry is less important. You may be involved here at the church, or at the workplace, or through various charity organizations. But for the majority of you, the most critical mission field, I believe, is probably right in your own back yard, within your own family systems. And so, to leave you with a picture of how eternally significant your influence is there, I want to read a letter that Edmond's daughter wrote to her papa in heaven:

Dear Daddy,

I wanted to tell you that I finally understand some things now that you've gone. First, I finally get how much you loved Jesus. When I think of how you loved me, I just want to trade this world to go and be with you and I want to tell everyone how wonderful you were. Your mannerisms, jokes, goofiness, frustrations and time management - you had your own rhythm and I knew you, and because I knew you I loved you. But somehow you figured out how to know Jesus like that while still on this earth. You knew Him and loved Him and gave up everything, traded it all, so you

could be with Him and couldn't stop telling everybody about Him. You'd say, "to know Him, is to love Him," and you'd say it to the bus driver at Disneyland, the waiter at Red Robbins, the cashier at Safeway, the lady who rear ended your car, and the homeless on the street. Your heart was always to either lead someone to Christ or bring whomever God put in front of you just one step closer. Secondly, I get that you worked to build the Kingdom. I realized that you never tried to minister to someone to get them to come to your church or to build your own thing. You always wanted people to just know the Lord and release them to continue on their journey with Christ, suggesting that they go to whatever bible believing church was nearest to them. I love that about you dad. You were a Kingdom builder and you weren't looking for points here on earth. Thirdly, and the hardest part, is I realize that I don't really love God as much as I love you. Now that you are in eternity and I'm still here, I'd love to be done and just go be with you. That's how much I miss you. But I've never felt that way about going to be with Jesus someday, never longed for it. I also realize that I'd rather tell people the gospel of Edmond Wong than the gospel of Jesus Christ, and I can sit all day and talk about how wonderful my dad was. But I know that you are not the one who saves - Jesus is. And His love is more powerful and wonderful than you could have ever given me. I know this in my head, but not yet in my heart. But I want to know Jesus, love Him and talk about Him all the time like you did. I'm not there yet, but I know it's possible because you showed me how it's done. And someday I'll be able to say, "to know Him is to love Him," and you will have to take second place in my heart dad. But I'm sure that you will be so happy when that day comes. So dad, I hope to share my faith boldly. I still feel kind of wimpy sometimes, but I know it will take some practice. I did witness to my car mechanic the other day. I kinda hoped you were watching. I thought I kind of sounded like you at one point. But it's not like a sales pitch that I learned from you; I really meant what I said to him and felt in my heart God's love for him. Thanks for teaching me how to do that too dad. Well, I will see you later, it seems not soon enough but it will be. I love you, and I know you "love me more."

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