



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

6420 Churchill Way | Dallas, Texas | 75230 | t 972.239.5371 | believerschapeldallas.org

The Sermons of Dan Duncan

Acts 28:17-31

Acts

"Chained But Unhindered"

TRANSCRIPT

[Message] Our text is Acts chapter 28 and we're going to look at verses 17 through 31. You remember from two weeks ago, the apostle Paul has finally arrived at Rome and Luke made that statement in a somewhat dramatic comment at the end of verse 14, "And so we came to Rome." Through all kinds of difficulty, through plots and imprisonments and storm and shipwreck, Paul finally arrived at Rome just as Jesus Christ had told him he would, and then we read in verse 17:

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."

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, and did this from morning until evening. Some were being persuaded by the things spoken, but others would not believe.

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; you will keep on seeing, but 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."

When he had spoken these words, the Jews departed, having a great dispute among themselves. And he 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.

May the Lord bless this reading of His Word. Let's pray.

[Prayer] Father, we do thank you for the opportunity that we have to gather together this Sunday morning and open the Scriptures and read them. What a privilege that is, to read your inerrant Word publicly and then to take time to consider the meaning of the text and how it applies to us. It is so important, Father, to do that. It is essential that we do that, to reflect upon you, to learn more about you.

There really can be nothing more practical that we do during the week than opening the Scriptures, reading them, and reflecting upon

who you are and what you have done, and then draw the practical implications from that. But it's as we consider you, as we see you in the Word, that we are transformed. That's how the work of sanctification occurs, Father. You have made that clear to us in the Scriptures that it's as we read the Scriptures that we're changed by the Scriptures. As we study them, we are transformed, and we pray that that would be the result of our time together this morning.

Change us. We confess our sins, that we are hard of heart, that we are indifferent to your Word so much of the time, we are caught up in the details of life and the things of this world, and we're carried about by that. We give you very little of our time, we confess that. As we begin a new year, we pray that you would give us a strong conviction and the will to carry through the desire and the intention to know your Word and to know you and to serve you faithfully. Bless us this morning to that end.

We thank you for the privilege that we have to gather together in a peaceful land, without political disturbance. That is a gift from you. You have prospered this land greatly, and we thank you for that. You have blessed us materially in so many ways, and we thank you for that. We pray that that would continue. We pray that you'd bless the leaders that you have placed over us. Give them wisdom as this new administration takes power in the weeks to come.

We pray that you would bless those men, our president, vice president, cabinet officials, congressmen, senators – all, Father, who are in places of authority. We pray that you would bless them with great wisdom and that you would prosper this land. But the most important thing of all, Father, is not prosperity, not physical prosperity, it's spiritual prosperity, and we pray that changes would take place in this land and that you might use us to that end.

We come to the end of a magnificent book, a great study in the history of the church, the first generation of the church, and the mission that it began with is the mission on which the book concludes, and it is our mission today. It has continued. May we carry forward

the mission of the apostles in the day in which we live. Use us to affect the lives, the souls of those around us.

So we pray for ourselves spiritually in the midst of material prosperity and yet we remember also the material needs of those around us. We pray for the sick. We pray for those who are recovering from surgery and those who are going to have surgery and for others, Father, who are experiencing difficulties and adversity of one kind or another. Encourage them through that, protect them through it, and bless them.

Bless all of us, Father. We pray that for our time now as we study together. Bless our final hymn. May it prepare our hearts well for our time of study together. We pray these things in Christ's name. Amen.

[Message] Periodically I quote William Cooper's line, "Behind a frowning providence, He hides a smiling face," and I quote that because it puts well the sovereignty and the mystery of God's care for His saints. Cooper was a brilliant poet and a hymn writer who had a hard life. He was converted in an insane asylum, restored to a sound mind, but still suffered from depression all his life. He knew from experience what a frowning providence is. Didn't always see the smiling face behind it – none of us does – but the Bible assures us that it is there. That God is in complete control and working everything for our personal good.

Paul taught that, and Paul's life exemplified it. For years he had hoped to minister in Rome. When he wrote the book of Romans, he told the Christians there of his desire to do that and then go on from Rome to Spain. Rome was also God's Will for Paul, but the ministry God had for him there was not the one that Paul had in mind. He was a prisoner in Rome, chained to a Roman guard day and night for two years. Now, we might wonder where the smiling face is in all of that. But as we read this last chapter, we see it shining through in various places. It was in fact Paul's chains that opened doors of opportunity that he could have had in no other way.

We see that in the last verse of the book where Paul is said to be preaching and teaching "with all openness, unhindered." That's the way the book of Acts ends, victoriously, with Paul in Rome preaching the gospel and that is where we come today in our study, to the end. In 28 chapters, Luke has traced the advance of the gospel from its small beginning in the distant province of Judea to its becoming a force throughout the world. He followed the pattern that Jesus gave back at the beginning in Acts 1:8 as the gospel spread like ripples on a pond from Jerusalem to Rome, from the Jewish temple to the remotest parts of the earth. That's why Rome was an important destination.

No city was more strategic for the spread of the gospel than Rome. No city was more in need of the gospel than the city of Rome. It was a pagan city and a proud city. The ancients used to say, "First among cities, the home of the gods is golden Rome." And Rome was a cruel city. When Paul arrived, it had a population of two million people. One million of them were slaves and Nero was the emperor. Paul was his prisoner, but only by God's providence, and almost immediately after arriving in the city, his imprisonment became an occasion for ministry. We read of that in verse 17, that after three days he called together those who were the leading men of the Jews.

Now, as we have seen throughout our studies in the book of Acts, that was Paul's practice, to begin with the Jewish community in the cities he visited. Had he been a free man, would have gone to their synagogues, and there were several synagogues in the city of Rome. The names of over ten of them have been preserved on inscriptions. But Paul was not a free man; Paul was a prisoner, and so he arranged for the Jewish leaders to visit him. It was the first of two meetings he had with these men, and this one in verses 17 through 20, Paul explains his presence in Rome and defends his innocence. He made his case in three points.

First, he told them that he had done nothing against the Jewish people or against their customs, their traditions. Second, the Romans believed he was innocent. They had examined him, he said, and they

were willing to release him and they would have released him except that the Jews objected and they continued to press their case against the apostle. And so thirdly, he explains, he was forced under those conditions to appeal to Caesar, and he, being a Roman citizen, was able to do that. So he was in Rome only to defend his innocence – not, he says, to complain about the Jewish nation or its leaders.

That must have been a word of assurance to them because some 10 or 15 years earlier, Claudius had expelled all the Jews from Rome. It was because of that that Paul met Priscilla and Aquila in Corinth. They had left Rome because of that expulsion, and evidently what had happened, there had been a disruption between the Jewish community and the young, small Christian church, and Claudius dealt with that disturbance by simply expelling the Jews from the city.

Well, they had since been reintegrated into Roman society not very long before. They were very sensitive about the situation, and Paul is reassuring them here, he's not coming to complain about the Jewish nation or its leaders; he was not there to disturb the Jewish people. In fact, he said in verse 20, "I am wearing this chain for the sake of the hope of Israel."

Well, the response of the rabbis was diplomatic. They said they had not heard anything about his case from Jerusalem either by letter or by messenger. They knew nothing bad about him, but as for Christianity, they said they had heard about it and what they had heard was not good. "It is spoken against everywhere," they said. But they were willing to hear his views on the subject, and so they set a date for a second meeting to talk about the Christian faith, which as Paul explained was also the hope of Israel.

This second meeting was larger than the first. It was attended not only by the rabbis but also by the prominent men of the synagogues. There was some real interest among them in what Paul had to say. He preached the gospel all day, verse 23 says, from morning until evening. He began by finding common ground with them. Luke writes that he was solemnly testifying about the kingdom

of God. The hope of Israel was the hope of the church. It is the hope of the people of God, which is the resurrection of the dead and the messianic kingdom that the resurrected will inherit. He went on to develop that, to develop the kingdom of God, in some detail.

He explained it, Luke says, and what that word "explain" means is he set out the facts of it. So he went into some detail on this subject. He didn't redefine the kingdom from what the Jews expected. They looked forward to a material kingdom on the earth. The disciples of our Lord anticipated that kind of kingdom, and Jesus taught that kind of kingdom. In Matthew 19:28, He told them, "Truly I say to you that you who have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of man will sit on his glorious throne, you also shall sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel."

Now, that's the hope of a future kingdom, when Christ will return, when Christ will sit on His throne, it is the hope of a glorious kingdom, the hope of a golden age in the future. It is in the regeneration, He says, when the world will be regenerated, as it were, following the resurrection of the body. In 1 Corinthians 6:10, Paul spoke of the kingdom as a future hope when he explained who will not inherit the kingdom of God. The immoral, the unrighteous will not inherit it, he says, and he gives a list of those who will not qualify for the kingdom of God. And that really gets to the essence of the kingdom and very much of what Paul must have discussed with these Jewish leaders.

They anticipated the messianic kingdom. They looked forward to the coming of Israel's king, the Messiah, when the nation Israel will be exalted above the nations of the earth. And they were right to do that, that is what the Bible teaches, but Paul explained that the kingdom of God was not essentially a material domain. It is essentially a realm of righteousness. That's how he defined it in Romans 14:17. The kingdom of God is not eating and drinking but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. It is essentially

spiritual. And so to enter that kingdom, to inherit it, a person must be righteous. It's not enough to be Jewish.

Citizenship in the kingdom of God is not anyone's birthright, as though they were born into it. That was a Jewish misconception but it's a misconception I think to some degree among people today. People have the feeling that – well, if they're born in America or they're born in the West or they're born into a Christian home, then they're Christians because of their birth, because of their environment, they're raised in the church as though that qualifies them to be Christians. Well, the Jewish people had that same kind of mindset. They believed that because they were born Jewish that they were heirs of the kingdom to come.

Jesus had to disabuse Nicodemus of that idea, and you'll remember that from John chapter 3 where He says, "Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." The first birth is not enough, there must be a second birth. The physical birth is not enough, there must be a spiritual birth. How could unrighteous people inherit a kingdom of righteousness? They cannot. They must be righteous to be heirs of a righteous kingdom. We must be born again. We must be born from above, as we can translate that statement. We must be born of God. John makes that clear from the beginning of his gospel to the end.

We need the grace of God, and that's what Paul taught and that's brought Paul to the subject of Christ and why He came into this world. It was to save sinners. It was to make them fit for the kingdom of God. In fact, as Paul points out in Galatians chapter 2, if we could be saved by our works, if law-keeping was sufficient, if that was a valid way of becoming heirs of the kingdom of God, then God never would have sent His son in the first place. The very fact that the Son of God came into the world, that Christ came into the world, is the proof that there was no other way of salvation than through Him and through His sacrifice. We need the grace of God. We need the coming of the Son of God.

But that was what the Jews stumbled over, a crucified Messiah. The very idea was scandalous to them, that the Messiah would be cursed and would be put to shame, would be made a public spectacle. The Messiah was a conquering king who would rule the nations with a rod of iron, not some carpenter from Galilee who was arrested and beaten and humiliated and executed by Romans. They saw him as one who would conquer the Romans, not be defeated by the Romans, and so Paul had to explain that while it is true that Christ will be an exalted king who will subdue the nations and rule them with a rod of iron. Psalm 2 makes that very clear.

Still, He first had to be a lowly servant and slain like a sacrificial lamb, and he proved all of this from the Old Testament. Luke writes that he was trying to persuade them concerning Jesus from both the law of Moses and from the prophets. Don't know what he said. The sermon is not recorded for us. I would love to have been in his rooms and listened to the sermon unfold as he preached from morning until evening. Must have been amazing. We don't know what he said but we can gather, I think, from the sermons that were preached in the book of Acts, what we have seen over the past year as we have studied through this book and what we know Paul believed from the book of Romans and others, what must have been the train of his thought.

I can imagine that he began at the beginning, that he began in Genesis 3:15, which is the first announcement of redemption with the promise of a deliverer who would come and defeat the devil. He would be born of a woman. In fact, the text says he would be her seed, her descendant, who would crush the head of the serpent. This was the promise that was given to Adam and Eve after the fall, after they had violated God's law, had eaten of the tree of which they were forbidden to eat, God had found them in their sin, and in that condition, He gives them a promise of deliverance.

Interestingly, though, that promise, that statement, that prophecy, is given to the serpent and the promise is of the serpent's

destruction. This child, this seed of the woman, would crush the head of the serpent. He would deliver a fatal blow to the serpent. He Himself would be wounded but not permanently. His heel would be bruised. The picture, of course, is of Christ defeating Satan on the cross, suffering death but not permanently. He was raised from the dead. He triumphed over the grave.

Now, that's the first promise that's given. It's somewhat cryptic to us, but it all begins to unfold as the Bible unfolds, and Paul might have developed that further from the book of Genesis in chapter 22 with the offering of Isaac on Mount Moriah. One day the Lord speaks to Abraham and He says, "Abraham, take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah and there offer him up as a burnt offering." What a thing to require of a father. In the end, it was not required of him but the defining moment came as the father and son were ascending Moriah and Isaac made the observation, "Father, behold the wood and the fire but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?"

Abraham responded, "God will Himself provide the lamb for the burnt offering." And you know the story how just before Abraham was ready to slay his son, the angel of the Lord prevented him and then there was found a ram, its horns were caught in a thicket, and in that way, God did provide the lamb for the sacrifice. All of that foreshadowed the sacrifice of Christ, the Lamb of God, that God would provide for His people. Then he could have explained the whole sacrificial system in light of that and how it was never intended as an end in itself. The blood of bulls and goats cannot take away sin.

That should be obvious to one who studies the issue and thinks about it. How can a slain lamb remove the guilt of my own sin? It can't, it's not sufficient for that, but it is sufficient to foreshadow the sacrifice of Jesus Christ to prefigure all that He would do with the sacrifice that God Himself would provide. And it had been prophesied in Isaiah 53 of how that would happen and who that person would be, one who would be like a lamb led to slaughter who would be pierced

through for our transgressions. Whose sufferings would satisfy God and justify the many. That's what everything pointed to. And there were other texts as well.

Besides Isaiah 53, there's Psalm 22 where David writes of those who pierced his hands and his feet and gambled for his clothes. David wasn't speaking of himself, that didn't happen to him. Speaking of another, he was speaking of one who would come, the one of whom Isaiah wrote, the one of whom Zechariah wrote in Zechariah 12:10 and 13:7. Paul would have pointed to all of these texts and others and would have explained how all of these passages were fulfilled in Christ's crucifixion. And yet it didn't end with the cross. Christ was raised from the dead, just as Psalm 16 prophesied He would be.

And he could add to that his own personal testimony, how he saw the risen Christ on the Damascus road in a blinding light and heard His voice, and he wasn't alone in that. Others were there. This was not some unique mystical experience that he had by himself, that those who had accompanied him had seen the light though they had not seen Christ, and they'd heard the sound of His voice though they could not understand what was said. But many others did see and hear Him and touched Him. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 15:6 that there were over 500 witnesses to the resurrection. So these things were not done in a corner, it was all public.

These are well-attested facts, and he must have assured them of this and argued that point. These things happened in fulfillment to the Scriptures and they must be believed, and he would have pressed them to believe. He would have told them that we are saved through faith, not by works of the law, but saved by faith in the Lamb of God, the Lord Jesus Christ. Law-keeping does not save and that, too, is a major point that Paul makes throughout his writings. The Old Testament teaches that we are not saved by works but rather we are saved through faith. Habakkuk 2:4, the just shall live by faith. Paul built the book of Romans around that theme and the book of Galatians around that theme.

It goes to the heart of the gospel, the just shall live by faith. It's through faith in Christ that we receive the righteousness that qualifies us to inherit the kingdom of God. That is true for the Jew and the Gentile alike. There is one Savior and one way of salvation.

Well, it was along these lines that Paul spoke to these Jewish men. It wasn't a straight lecture. Paul was speaking to rabbis. They knew the Scriptures, they had ideas of their own, and they had sharp minds and they raised questions with him. They challenged Paul and he challenged them. They went back and forth and this went on from morning until evening in an earnest exchange. When they came to the end of it, some of Paul's visitors were convinced but most were not. There was a division among them. It was not unexpected.

Paul had seen that response in city after city and synagogue after synagogue, but it seems that there in Rome, there in these rooms of the apostle Paul that the definitive rejection took place. So as they began to leave, Paul had some final words for them. The words of Isaiah 6. These are the words that God gave to Isaiah when He commissioned him to have his great ministry to Judah, a people who had rejected the truth of God, and he was to preach a very difficult message and have a very hard ministry, and this is what God told Isaiah to say and what Paul said to these Jewish men. Verse 26:

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. 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."

That's about judicial hardening, and judicial hardening is the consequence of willfully rejecting the truth of God, and Paul must have recited those words with a heavy heart. He loved the Jewish people. His kinsmen, according to the flesh. But he saw in their rejection of the gospel the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy, and it reminds us of what a solemn thing it is to hear the gospel given and to

hear the Word of God taught and to come under the conviction of the Holy Spirit. It requires a response from us, and it requires a response of obedience. It requires a response of faith. We may not understand everything that we hear or that we read, but we must be responsive to it.

And it's as we believe that we come into an understanding of it, and we grow in our understanding of it, but as we reject it, as we turn our hearts from it, our minds from it, then the opposite takes place, and we don't understand the things of God. So it reminds us of how solemn it is to hear the Word of God taught and to be obedient to it when there is no obedience. When people turn away from the truth, there is a consequence. Their hearts become hardened. They become insensitive to the truth. As someone has pointed out, the same fire that melts wax hardens clay, and Word of God is a fire, and the Word of God hardened the hearts of these Jewish people.

Perhaps Paul hoped that Isaiah's words would soften them. Calvin thought so. He said that Paul used these words like a hammer to smash the hardness of the ungodly. Maybe he did. They are fearful words that should have given these men pause as they left. But still they left. Still they turned away from Paul and the gospel, and as they did Paul said, "Therefore, let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will also listen." And they would. God is not finished with the Jews, but this was the dawn of the age of Gentile conversions. It was God's plan, Paul understood it. It was according to election.

He had explained all of this in the book of Romans in chapters 9 through 11. "They are not all Israel who are descended from Israel," Paul wrote. In other words, they are not all chosen by God who were born of the chosen people of God. "He has mercy on whom He desires and He hardens whom He desires," Romans 9:18. The choice is always with God. He is sovereign in this matter of salvation. No one knew that better than Paul did. Election and reprobation, though, did not excuse Israel's unbelief. The Jewish people sinned against the

truth and Paul held them accountable and guilty as each one of us is to be held accountable if we do not respond to the truth of God.

But election did not keep Paul from evangelizing the Jewish people. He knew that there may be some among them who were elect and would respond as he had and as had many other Jewish men and women in the early church, and so he spoke. And at the end of that day, some had believed, some did respond, and though it grieved him greatly that others didn't though he could wish himself accursed for their sake, nevertheless he spoke and he still ministered. His ministry went on and Luke describes it in the final verses of the chapter. For two more years, he stayed in his rented quarters and was welcoming all who came to him, which was a change.

In previous years, Paul had come to people. He had traveled over land and sea to bring the gospel to Jews and Gentiles. Now people were coming to him. All kinds of people. Some Jews but mainly Gentiles. The great and the small alike. He had a ministry among his Roman guards that reached even into Caesar's household. So he was visited by Roman patricians as well as by Roman slaves. It was during this time that Onesimus ran away from his master Philemon in the city of Colossae. He came to Rome. He probably hoped to lose himself in the crowded streets of the capital but something happened. We don't know what but maybe he became destitute and he needed help.

Whatever the cause was, Onesimus knew that Paul was in Rome. He sought him out and was converted by the apostle. That would not have happened had Paul not been in Rome, humanly speaking. It was because of his imprisonment that this man, this slave, was introduced to Jesus Christ, was born again, was saved. Had a very close connection with Paul. In fact, Paul, when he wrote to Philemon about Onesimus, he called Onesimus "my child." Onesimus was a great help to Paul. He became very useful to Philemon and to the church. All kinds of people came to Paul, and when he wasn't explaining the gospel or giving wise counsel, he was writing letters.

It was from his confinement in Rome that Paul wrote his prison epistles, the books of Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. So Paul's years in prison were not idle years. In fact, he wrote to the Philippians that his circumstances had turned out for the greater progress of the gospel. It was spreading throughout the city to all levels of society and along the Roman roads into various parts of the empire. For years, Paul had wanted a ministry in Rome but he could never have imagined the way it would happen. It was greater than anything the apostle Paul himself could have planned.

Because of his arrest, he stood before world leaders, from the Roman governors Felix and Festus to the Jewish king Agrippa, and finally he would stand before the emperor himself and make a defense of the Christian faith to Nero – just as Jesus had promised him. This was the smile in the frowning providence of Paul's circumstances. His chains were the means of opening doors to audiences that might otherwise have been closed to him. They were difficult years. From the time of his arrest in Jerusalem to the end of his time in Rome, Paul was in prison for almost five years.

But they were not wasted years and they were not dreary years. At least Paul did not become depressed by his circumstances. In the epistle to the Philippians, he struck a theme of joy throughout. "Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say rejoice," and Paul did that in chains in prison. The peace, the joy, the patience that he had was because he believed in the sovereignty of God, who is the God of all circumstances. And his other prison epistles express that very fact. Paul was facing trial and possibly death at the whim and impulse of the emperor, who was a madman, but Paul knew that the ultimate authority was not Nero but Christ, and he was in His hand.

He told the Ephesians that God works all things after the counsel of His Will. To the Colossians he wrote that Christ created all things, holds everything together by the will of His power and has supremacy over all things. He is exalted over all things. He is the king of the earth and the universe. These truths were confirmed and

enlarged in Paul's mind through his imprisonment. Because as he saw the gospel advance in spite of adverse circumstances and indeed because of them, all of that was confirmed in Paul's mind.

Only a sovereign God could do this. Only a sovereign God can turn an imprisonment and chains into a ministry and a pulpit, and not just to people in Rome but a ministry that would have worldwide influence. So Paul, as he reflected on these things, marveled at the sovereignty and the grace of God and that made him rejoice, and so he could tell others to do that. That's the counsel that he gave to those to whom he wrote from prison, told them to reflect upon the things of God, to set their mind on these things. Set your mind on the things above, he told the Colossians, not on the things that are on earth.

Reflect upon who God is, what He's doing, what He will do. As we do that, we will rejoice in whatever circumstances we find ourselves in. And that often is not easy circumstances. The providence of God sometimes leads us into some unexpected and uncomfortable places. It may be a difficult situation at work, it may be a hard marriage, it may be protracted illness, or times of loneliness, but providence is not fate and it is not chance. Nothing happens by mistake. All our circumstances are by design and we must learn to rejoice in them. That's what Paul tells us to do.

Paul could tell the Philippians to do that while he sat in prison, unjustly accused, unjustly imprisoned, and yet he could rejoice and we must learn to do that. I say "learn" because it takes time. It's something that we do learn. It's not an easy thing to face a hard circumstance and rejoice. We can be rather glib if we say that it is. We must learn it and so we must pray that God will cause us to grow so that we can do that, so that we can rejoice and be useful for the Lord in those places. That's why God has us where He has us, in the circumstances and in the places that we are, to serve Him. Paul served the Lord in prison, unjustly in prison, but he served the Lord joyfully and greatly.

The book ends on a triumphant note with Paul preaching the kingdom of God and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness, unhindered. That's quite a picture. Paul in the capital of the pagan empire, golden Rome, preaching the kingdom of God. A prisoner of Caesar proclaiming that Jesus Christ is the King, and I can imagine that he oftentimes would explain the second chapter of the book of Daniel where they have that amazing dream that Nebuchadnezzar had one night, no one could interpret but Daniel.

Or the great image that represented the empires of the world and then that stone from heaven cut out without hands that comes down and strikes that image at its clay feet and the image crumbles and the stone grinds it to dust and it's blown away. And then that stone, which represents Christ and his kingdom, fills the earth and he proclaimed that in the heart of the capital of this pagan empire and said Christ will triumph. Not Caesar, not Rome, but Jesus Christ, and he did that unhindered. That's the work of God and that's where the book ends. The first three decades of the history of the church ends where it began with the gospel of Jesus Christ being proclaimed.

What ultimately happened to Paul, Luke doesn't tell us. Eventually he stood before Caesar. He may have been released after his first trial and done evangelistic work in the eastern part of the empire and then gone west to Spain. He seems to have anticipated release, from his letters to the Philippians and Philemon. If so, it's clear from 2 Timothy 4:6-8 that he was re-arrested and later martyred. According to tradition, he was beheaded by order of Nero. But Luke tells us none of that. He gives no epilogue to the book because Luke was not writing a biography of Paul or of Peter or of any of the apostles. The book of Acts is not the acts of the apostles; it is the acts of the Holy Spirit.

His work did not end with the first century. It goes on today. That's the reason that Luke left his book unfinished but victorious. That's the mission of the apostles, to preach the Word of God. That's the mission that God gave them, that Jesus Christ gave them, to preach

the gospel of Jesus Christ, and that mission did not end with the apostles – it goes on in each generation. What began in Jerusalem and spread out to Judea and Samaria and then to the remotest parts of the earth continued to spread long after the apostle Paul.

The 18th century British historian Edward Gibbon described the early progress of Christianity in his book, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. He wrote, "While the great body" – speaking of the Roman empire – "was invaded by open violence, or undermined by slow decay, a pure and humble religion gently insinuated itself into the minds of men, grew up in silence and obscurity, derived new vigor from opposition, and finally erected the triumphant banner of the cross on the ruins of the capital." That's well said.

Rome, mighty Rome, collapsed but the church continued. It spread well beyond the ancient borders of the empire into all the world, into the remotest parts of the earth, to plant the gospel on every continent. Gibbon was not a Christian man. He criticized the church and he admired Julian the Apostate, but he described the advance of the church pretty accurately, I think. It introduced the gospel into men's minds gently, not by force or coercion or deception but by clearly stating the truth of God's Word. Paul came to Rome armed with nothing but the sworn of God's Word, but that was sufficient. It is, as he told the Romans, the power of God for salvation and he preached it.

Over the years and generations that followed, men and women spoke the Word of God wherever they went and conversions happened, churches were established, and lives were changed. Those Christians didn't try to win the world with entertainment or by compromise or with an easy gospel. They confronted the world with the one-way gospel that the apostles preached, the one that Peter stated so clearly at the beginning of this book in Acts 4:12, "And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved." That name is the name Jesus Christ who is very God of very God and the only Savior.

The gospel today is the same as it was then. The mission is the same. It is to take that same gospel to our neighborhoods, to our places of work, and to the remotest parts of the earth. And God will guide and protect us with his smiling providence in that mission as we do it until it ends when Christ comes again to the Mount of Olives and establishes His kingdom on the earth. That's what we look forward to. That's our hope, that's the promise, and it will happen.

Is that your hope? Are you looking for the Lord's return and His kingdom? That's the goal of history, and as I said, that will happen. But it is only those who hope in Christ who will inherit the kingdom of God. He is the Savior who died for sinners. Those who believe in Him have their sins wiped away and Christ's righteousness imputed to them. If you are here this morning without Christ, realize that you are a sinner in need of a Savior. That's true for all of us. All have sinned, Paul says, and come short of the glory of God. Every one of us.

We cannot save ourselves. If we're to be saved, if we're to inherit the kingdom to come, we must have a Savior, and Jesus Christ is that Savior, so look to Him. Trust in Him. The moment you do that, you receive the full, complete forgiveness of sins, you have life everlasting. May God help you to do that and help all of us to rejoice always and serve the Lord faithfully as we carry on the apostolic mission. Let's pray.

[Prayer] Father, we do thank you for this text and this great book. We see courageous men and women doing mighty deeds, supernatural things. Not because of anything in them inherently but because of the work of God within them, the work of the Holy Spirit. This is the acts of the Holy Spirit. The work of Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit as He planted His gospel in Jerusalem and caused it to spread throughout the world, as it continues to spread.

And Father, we thank you, we who have believed in Him thank you that we are part of that. We have been made members of your family, citizens of the kingdom to come. What a privilege, what a

blessing that is. And may we, as we come to a new year, enter that new year with the conviction and the desire to spread the gospel, to be men and women who know your Word and communicate it to others. May we be good and faithful servants, we pray, and we pray these things in Christ's name. Amen.