

PAUL AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD
ACTS 28:16-31

I.

Much of the information with which we are bombarded in the news involves struggles for power. In the Middle East the US and Israel are fighting to exert power over the evil regime in Iran. The evil Iranian leaders are struggling to maintain power over citizens who are increasingly unhappy. In Europe Russia is trying to exert power over Ukraine. In this hemisphere the US is trying to exert power over Venezuela and now Cuba.

Closer to home the Republicans and the Democrats are seeking to exert power over messaging concerning the midterm elections. There is a power struggle over the shutdown of Homeland Security. There has been a battle over power in Minnesota with fraud accusations and with the role of ICE and immigration.

Given the significant number of evangelical Christians who live in our country, there has been much discussion and debate about how we should use our power in regard to national issues. We generally oppose abortion and gay marriage, but how do we best promote our values? There are other issues where we don't always have the same opinions: gun rights, climate change, immigration, the economy.

The question is: What is the proper use of power and influence for us evangelical Christians? There is a minority group within evangelicalism called Reconstructionism which has a view of future things called postmillennialism. Their conviction is that Jesus will come back and establish His kingdom upon the earth only when Christians have Christianized all of society. So our responsibility is to take over government and make it and its leaders Christian and to operate on the basis of the Bible. What does God think of this authority and control stuff? The passage before us this morning deals with these questions as it focuses on the subject of the kingdom of God and our responsibility as Christians to the world around us.

We have spent over a year working our way through the Book of Acts on Sunday mornings. We have come today to the last message from this book. Next Sunday is Palm Sunday. After that comes Easter. After that I plan to begin a series on the little New Testament book of 2 Peter.

(PROJECTOR ON--- PAUL'S MISSIONARY JOURNEYS) Almost the last two-thirds of the Book of Acts has focused on the life of the Apostle Paul. We have seen how this Jewish rabbi was converted to Christ and proceeded to establish churches in the Gentile world throughout these areas of the Roman Empire. After his third missionary expedition he came to Jerusalem. Jews stirred up a riot when they saw him in the temple there. They hated him for his preaching about Jesus and for his teaching that Gentiles could become right with God apart from becoming Jews.

Paul was rescued from this riot by the Romans, who had a garrison next to the temple and kept an eye on the activities which happened there. Because Paul was a Roman citizen, he had certain legal protections that kept him from being handed over to the Jewish leaders. But the Roman governors of this province of Judea wanted to stay on good terms with the religious leaders. (CAESAREA) So they kept him in prison in the capital of the province, Caesarea.

After two years of imprisonment Paul appealed to Caesar. This meant that he had to go to Rome to stand trial. (PAUL'S TRIP TO ROME) So Paul was sent with other prisoners and a detachment of Roman soldiers to travel to Rome by sea in the fall of 59 AD. We looked at what happened as the result of a terrible storm at sea. Last time we saw that he finally made it to Rome.

(ANCIENT ROME) Verse 16 of our passage says, **“And when we came into Rome, Paul was allowed to stay by himself, with the soldier who guarded him.”** From his New Testament letters we know that he was handed over to an officer of the Praetorian Guard, the most prestigious unit of all the Roman army. Probably because of the instructions of the Roman governor of Judea and perhaps the added testimony of the centurion, Paul was allowed to have his own living quarters. He was still guarded by a Roman soldier and probably chained to his wrist 24 hours a day. But he had a fair amount of freedom as a prisoner. Being chained to elite Roman soldiers meant another evangelism opportunity. Paul would write later in Philippians #1 that Paul and his gospel story had become well known throughout the whole Praetorian Guard.

I.

One of the other opportunities that Paul had in his situation of house arrest was a chance to speak to the leading Jews of Rome. This is the focus of our passage today. In vv. 17-23 we are going to consider the subject of THE MESSAGE OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD. (I. THE MESSAGE OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD)

About ten years earlier the Roman Emperor Claudius had kicked all of the Jews out of Rome. We don't know why he did this. It may have been as a result of arguments and fights that were going on in the Jewish community about the claims of Jesus to be the Messiah. Whatever happened, the new emperor Nero let Jews come back to Rome a few years before the time of our story. There have been eleven ancient synagogues that have been discovered by archaeologists in Rome that date back to this time period. So there was a large Jewish community in the city.

Paul was a Jewish rabbi by training and background. He loved his countrymen, and he wanted them to come to see that Jesus truly was the Messiah. So at the earliest opportunity he invited the Jewish leaders of Rome to come to see him. He also was no doubt curious to find out how much they knew about him as a result of information that might have come to them from Jerusalem. Potentially these local Jews could try to have some influence in Paul's legal case that would be tried in the emperor's court.

So in vv. 17-20 we read, **“After three days he called together the local leaders of the Jews, and when they had gathered, he said to them, ‘Brothers, though I had done nothing against our people or the customs of our fathers, yet I was delivered as a prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans. 18 When they had examined me, they wished to set me at liberty, because there was no reason for the death penalty in my case. 19 But because the Jews objected, I was compelled to appeal to Caesar— though I had no charge to bring against my nation. 20 For this reason, therefore, I have asked to see you and speak with you, since it is because of the hope of Israel that I am wearing this chain.’”**

For someone who had been beaten up, locked up in prison for two years, sent off to Rome, and shipwrecked all because of trumped up charges lodged against him by the Jewish religious leaders, it was a fascinating display of restraint in his remarks. Paul’s concern, however, was not in venting anger against his persecutors but in gaining a hearing for his message.

According to vv. 21 & 22 the Jews of Rome responded, **“We have received no letters from Judea about you, and none of the brothers coming here has reported or spoken any evil about you. 22 But we desire to hear from you what your views are, for with regard to this sect we know that everywhere it is spoken against.”**

Since the difficult winter season was just coming to an end, it may be that reports about Paul had just not arrived yet. It is also fascinating that these Jews were unfamiliar with the views of the Apostle Paul. Three years earlier Paul had written a letter to the Christians at Rome. We know this letter today as the New Testament book of Romans. This letter indicates that there was a substantial Christian presence in Rome already. The church included Jews as well as Gentiles. Probably it had been started by Jewish Christians. Probably they had first tried to reach other Jews with the message that Jesus was the Messiah and that He had died and risen from the dead to pay the penalty for their sins. Yet the Jewish leaders standing before Paul seem not to have understood the message.

Living in a country where a majority of people identify themselves as Christians and where Christian TV and radio stations have a strong presence and where the Bible remains a regular best seller we might likewise assume that most all people have a basic understanding of the gospel message. Yet they often don’t.

I grew up going to a church every Sunday. Yet it was not until I was twelve years old that I recall hearing a clear explanation of how it is that a person becomes a Christian. It was at a summer Bible camp that I heard a preacher explain that the only way we can go to heaven is by trusting in Jesus as our Savior. When we come to the point of personally trusting Him as our Savior and inviting Him into our lives, then we receive the gift of eternal life and the forgiveness of sins. So we need to be careful that we don’t assume that people around us understand the gospel. Often they have never heard a clear explanation of it.

These Jews in Rome were truly interested in finding out about what this controversial Jewish Christian rabbi was teaching. So we read in v. 23, **“When they had appointed a day for him, they came to him at his lodging in greater numbers. From morning till evening he expounded to them, testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus both from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets.”**

So a whole lot of Jewish people showed up on a particular day to hear Paul’s views. They spent the whole day interacting with him. The focus of their discussion was the subject of the kingdom of God and the relationship of Jesus to it.

The subject of the kingdom of God is mentioned two times in Chapter 1. Now it appears twice in this last chapter. It forms what literary people would call an *inclusio*. (ACTS 1:3) Back in #1 in v. 3 the writer Luke said, **“He--- Jesus--- presented himself alive to them--- disciples--- after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.”** A few verses later His disciples asked Him if it was at this time that He was restoring the kingdom to Israel. Jesus said that it was not for them to know the timing of such things. Instead they were to focus on being witnesses of their experience with Jesus. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Our passage doesn’t tell us exactly what Paul said to these Jews about Jesus and the kingdom of God. We can have a general idea because we have seen something of what he told the Jews on other occasions in the Book of Acts, and we have the same Old Testament that he did.

The term “kingdom of God” is one of those religious words that we have some idea about but that is hard for us to picture in detail. If we break it down, it isn’t quite so complicated. Let me summarize briefly what the Bible says about it, how Jesus relates to it, and what relevance it has to us.

To have a kingdom we need to have a king, subjects, a territory to rule, and rules of operation. We are told in the first book of the Bible that God created man and made him ruler over the earth. Adam, in effect, was appointed as king over the earth. He was instructed to rule it and subdue it. But Adam and his wife broke one of the very few rules that governed this kingdom, and sin entered into the picture. Ruling the earth became a struggle. The animals didn’t get along with each other. People didn’t get along with each other. The ground produced thistles and weeds, and most importantly people turned away from God.

So God sovereignly chose to use the descendants of Abraham as the instruments through which His kingdom would be established upon the earth. He made special agreements with the Jewish people by which they were to be rightly related to Him. They didn’t do a very good job of observing these agreements. Eventually God promised that one of these Jews, a descendant of David, would be the man who would be the leader of this kingdom of God.

The Book of Isaiah, one of the prophets whom Paul speaks about, gives us brief descriptions of what this kingdom would look like. It would involve a situation of peace and prosperity. It would involve a situation in which people would live to be much older than they do now. It would be a time in which justice would prevail upon the earth. It would be a time in which Israel would have a prominent role in world history. If you want to check out some of these descriptions of this coming earthly kingdom of God, jot down these passages in Isaiah: #2, #11, #25, #60 #65.

The prophet Isaiah, as well as some of the other prophets, also described something about what the king of this kingdom would be like. In Isaiah #11 this coming ruler, or Messiah, is described as being a shoot from the stem of Jesse, the father of King David. It also says that he will have the spirit of wisdom and that he will act as a judge. In #35 the prophet spoke of the coming of this ruler being accompanied by the healing of the blind and the deaf and the lame and the dumb. (PROJECTOR ON--- MICAH 5:2) The prophet Micah said that Bethlehem would be the birthplace of this one who **“is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.”**

When John the Baptist showed up years later, his message was “Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand.” Then Jesus came on the scene and His message also was “Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand.” (PROJECTOR OFF) Jesus was that king. Because His own people would not accept Him, the implementation of that kingdom was delayed. Jesus was killed. It was necessary in the plan of God that He would die to pay the penalty for the sins of the world. But He rose from the dead. As we saw from reading the verses in Acts #1, He still spoke about the coming of the kingdom of God. His apostles continued to say that Jesus would return to establish His kingdom upon the earth to fulfill the promises made in both the Old Testament and the New Testament.

The Book of Revelation describes that return of Christ in some detail and in #20 of that book we are specifically told that Christ will return to rule for a thousand years upon the earth. This kingdom of God stuff was a big deal to the Jewish people. They looked forward to this coming reign of the Messiah upon the earth. These promises about the kingdom were involved in what Paul was talking about in v. 20 of our chapter when he spoke of “the hope of Israel.” That is why Paul spent so much time talking about the subject. The problem was that these Jewish people had difficulty accepting the notion that Jesus was their king and messiah.

The promise in both the Old Testament and the New Testament was that the people of God would participate in this coming kingdom of God. In order for that to happen there must be a resurrection from the dead. True believers died without seeing the fulfillment of the promises. There are references to this resurrection from the dead in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. So believing Jews in the Old Testament and genuine Christians today can look forward to a resurrection from the dead and an actual participation in this coming kingdom of God that will come to the earth. Most of the Jews in Paul’s day professed a belief in such a resurrection. That is why one argument that he used in regard to Jesus was that they were hypocritical in professing such a belief

and then in refusing to consider the possibility of such a resurrection happening with Jesus.

So the message of the kingdom that Paul preached was that Jesus was the king of this kingdom. But the Jewish leaders and most of the Jewish people rejected Jesus and killed Him. Nevertheless He rose from the dead and is promising that He will come a second time. This time He will set up His kingdom upon the earth. All of those who have put their trust in Him can look forward to ruling in this kingdom with Him. The Jews that Paul was talking to needed to believe that, and we need to believe it, too.

II.

This was the message of the kingdom. (PROJECTOR ON--- THE MISSION OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD) We also need to say a word about THE MISSION OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD. In Acts #1 when the disciples asked Jesus if it was at this time that the kingdom of God was going to be restored to Israel, He replied that it wasn't their job to know the timing of this. (ACTS 1:8) He told His disciples, "**But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.**"

The mission of the early Christians was to be witnesses to others about their experience with Jesus, the king of this coming kingdom. They were to start in their home territory and move out to the rest of the world with this witness.

We have seen from our study of Acts that Paul was an ideal model of this witness. (PROJECTOR OFF) He started in his own area and proceeded to move out to the rest of the world. At the end of the book he is in Rome, the capital of the Roman Empire, witnessing to others about Jesus. His pattern here as elsewhere was to reach out to people with whom he had a natural tie. He went first to fellow Jews. After that he reached out to Gentiles. He had difficult trials and challenges that came his way as he was carrying out this mission. But Paul came to recognize these as further opportunities to be a witness for Christ.

Our job as Christians is also to be witnesses to others about our experience with Jesus. The starting point for this witness is people in our realm of influence. We need to reach out to relatives and friends and coworkers first. Then we need to focus our concern upon the larger world around us. We need to be involved in, and supportive of, the cause of world missions. As we have trials and difficulties that come our way, we need to recognize them, as Paul did, as opportunities to be witnesses for Christ.

III.

Then from vv. 24-28 we need to notice THE MIXED RESPONSE TO THE KINGDOM OF GOD. (PROJECTOR ON--- III. THE MIXED RESPONSE TO THE KINGDOM OF GOD) We are told in v. 24, "**And some were convinced by what he said, but others disbelieved.**" At Jerusalem most of the religious leaders would not even seriously consider the claims of Jesus that Paul was presenting. The Jewish leaders at Rome were at least considering the message of Paul. Some responded positively, though it

was a minority. But this was always the pattern that Paul found on his missionary journeys. Some Jews would respond to his message. Most would not. Then he would turn to the Gentiles. Usually he found a more positive reception from them.

Here most of the Jews refuse to accept Paul's arguments. Luke says beginning in v. 25, **"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;/ Lest they should see with their eyes,/ And hear with their ears,/ And understand with their heart and turn again,/ And I should heal them.'"** Let it be known to you therefore, that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will also listen."

Israel had a special role in regard to this kingdom of God business. The promise was that it would be a Jew who would be the king of this kingdom and that Israel would have a position of prominence in this kingdom. But the prophet Isaiah, who said much about this coming kingdom, also foresaw that the Jewish people would reject the coming king. Paul sees the words of Isaiah #6 as relating to this rejection of the king and the kingdom by Israel.

(ISAIAH 65:1) At the beginning of Isaiah #65 Isaiah also said, **"I was ready to be sought by those who did not ask for me;/ I was ready to be found by those who did not seek me./ I said, 'Here I am, here I am,'/ to a nation that was not called by my name."** The nation that would not call on His name was Israel. Thus it was that Gentiles became the ones who would primarily become the followers of Jesus.

Paul also recognized that eventually the Jews would recognize their error and turn in greater numbers to Jesus as the Messiah. (ROMANS 11:25) Three years earlier he wrote to the Roman in #11 v. 25 and following, **"Lest you be wise in your own sight, I do not want you to be unaware of this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. (ROMANS 11:26-27) And in this way all Israel will be saved, as it is written [quoting from Isaiah #59] 'The Deliverer will come from Zion./ he will banish ungodliness from Jacob;/ and this will be my covenant with them/ when I take away their sins.'"**

Today we still see a mixed response to the gospel of Jesus Christ. The church is primarily composed of Gentiles. But we see more Jewish people coming to recognize that Jesus is their messiah. According to Israel College of the Bible there were 5,000 Christian Jews in 80 congregations in Israel in 1998. Today there are 30,000 Jewish Christians in 280 congregations in Israel (PROJECTOR OFF) There has been a similar growth among Jewish Christians in our country.

But the main point for us to realize is that the message about salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ always gets a mixed response. It is the nonreligious who are often

the most open to the message about Jesus. Religious people often have a tendency to think that they are OK with God. God will accept them because they are religious. They go to synagogue, or they go to church, and they have an 'in' with God. When they hear the message that salvation comes by being born again, by trusting in Jesus alone for eternal life, they may respond: I go to church. I've been baptized. I believe in God. I'm a good person. I don't need this born again stuff.

People who aren't religious and sense some kind of spiritual yearnings or have some kind of problem with drinking or drugs or families or depression or whatever may be more open. They may realize that there is something missing from their lives, or that they need help. They may be more open to the gospel. So it was that the disciples and the religious leaders were always noticing that Jesus was hanging out with tax-gatherers and prostitutes and sinners rather than with the rabbis or the religious people. The religiously correct people in Jesus' day didn't like that. We can take comfort from noticing the kind of people He liked to hang out with, and who liked to hang out with Him. It was people with problems who were the most receptive to Him. And so it often is today.

IV.

Finally in vv. 30 & 31 we come to consideration of THE MESSENGER OF THE KINGDOM. (PROJECTOR ON--- THE MESSENGER OF THE KINGDOM) Luke concludes the book with these words: **“He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.”**

During this two year period Paul did more teaching and preaching. He also authored the New Testament books of Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. The ending of the story may seem a bit abrupt. But keep in mind that Paul originally wrote this account to a Roman official whose name was Theophilus. The main point that Luke wanted to convey to this Roman official in his ending was that if this preaching of the Christian message was illegal and subversive, it would have been impossible for a Roman citizen chained to a member of the Praetorian guard to get away with proclaiming it in a situation of house arrest for a period of two years. Luke was seeking to demonstrate the legitimacy of Christianity before Roman law and government.

Apparently Paul's case had not yet been decided at the time that Luke wrote Acts. The emperor at this time was Nero. The emperor before Nero, who was Claudius, heard most of the appeals that were made by people like Paul. Nero seems to have usually delegated that responsibility to others when he was emperor. So whether standing before Caesar should simply be understood as meaning that Paul would stand trial in Caesar's court, or whether he would appear before the emperor himself, we don't know. It is possible that Nero could have had enough interest in this Christianity thing to want to hear the case himself.

Whatever happened, it seems clear that Paul was found innocent of the charges against him and freed. Early tradition and indications in some of his later writings in the New Testament indicate that he was released from this imprisonment. There are also hints that upon his release Paul visited Crete, Ephesus, Greece, and maybe Spain.

Early church tradition says that Paul was rearrested and this time beheaded in Rome in 67 AD when Nero was still emperor. Nero in his earlier years was a fairly reasonable and decent emperor. Later on he became increasingly violent and very anti-Christian. It was in July of 64 AD that the city of Rome burned. Nero blamed it on the Christians, which charge had no basis in fact. But after that he began an intense persecution of Christians. Paul was one of his victims.

Paul was whipped on five occasions, beaten with rods three times, stoned once and left for dead, shipwrecked four different times, arrested several times, left in prison for a number of years, and executed at the end of his life. He apparently was not married. He spent much of his life traveling around the Roman world without a house to claim as his own. Yet in the latter part of his life (ROMANS 8:18) he wrote these words in Romans #8 vv. 18 & 19, **“For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. (ROMANS 8:19) For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God.”**

Paul thought his suffering was worth it. In fact he didn't think that it could even compare with the glory that was to be revealed in the future. Paul was looking forward to the coming of the kingdom of God upon the earth. He was convinced that he was going to have a role in that coming thousand year kingdom. From his perspective the sufferings of his present life paled in comparison to the joy that was going to come from living and ruling with Jesus in this coming kingdom. (PROJECTOR OFF)

We can also look forward to living and ruling with Jesus in this coming kingdom if we have trusted Him as our Savior. That prospect should motivate us to be messengers of the kingdom of God. It should motivate us to put up with hardship and trials and difficulties. The kingdom of God upon the earth and the life that will follow will be more incredible than we can imagine. What sacrifices we make now in promoting the message of the gospel and the cause of Christ will be so worth it from the perspective of eternity that we will have no regrets.

We humans were created to rule and to exercise power. But it was intended that we rule and exercise power under the authority of our Creator. We were intended to lead and to rule according to His guidelines and in service to Him. We were intended to be witnesses for Jesus and messengers of the kingdom of God. In that pursuit we will find the greatest fulfillment in life. As a result of that pursuit we can look forward to a great future.

In the course of this Acts study I made reference to several Russian Christian dissidents. One of them was Alexei Navalny. He stood up for human rights in Russia.

He led political opposition and headed up a foundation that revealed corruption in the highest ranks of government. For that he was mistreated, jailed on false charges, and poisoned. After the first poisoning he got medical help in Germany. In spite of the circumstances he returned to Russia and was promptly jailed again and sent to Siberia. Two years ago he was poisoned and killed. In the last words of his autobiography he penned these words shortly before his death: **“My job is to seek the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and leave it to good old Jesus and the rest of his family to deal with everything else.”** (*Patriot*, p. 479)

Jesus taught His disciples to pray, **“Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done.”** That was Paul’s longing. It should be ours as well.