

## *Paul's Paradox*

Acts 28:30-31

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Let's go to God's Word this morning together. We are finishing the Book of Acts this morning. Going to finish with the last two verses of the Book of Acts. Acts chapter 28, verses 30 to 31. If you have your Bibles, please feel free to turn there. If not, the passage is before you on the screens.

But first, I have a quote that has been helpful to me this week as I've prepared to hear God's Word this final portion of the story of the ministry of Paul as it's recorded for us in the Book of Acts. J. Gresham Machen, one of the early fathers of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, said during his ministry—I'm not sure when—but he said these words:

False ideas are the greatest obstacles to the reception of the gospel. We may preach with all the fervor of a reformer and yet succeed only in winning a straggler here and there, if we permit the whole collective thought of a nation or of the world to be controlled by ideas which, by the resistless force of logic, prevent Christianity from being regarded as anything more than a harmless delusion. Under such circumstances, what God desires us to do is to destroy the obstacle at its root.

What Machen was referring to, and what is often forgotten by those and us who read the Scriptures, particularly if you are sitting before me this morning as professing Christian—that everything that left Paul's mouth was to the world around him completely implausible. The entire structure of ideas and philosophy of his day were set against the plausibility of what he taught and what he believed. So Paul—faithfully, without malice, without vengeance, without corrupting others with crude talk and destroying them in their personhood—he sought to destroy the root of the ideas that led or tried to see that Christianity was somehow just easily dismissed.

The end of the Book of Acts does not leave us with the end of the Book of Acts as a little package wrapped up with a bow around it. There is much left yet unresolved. We finish this book without actually hearing the testimony of Paul before Nero. This is now 62 A.D. But it leaves us with an open-ended drama that Paul was preaching and he was teaching for two whole years, and in so doing, seeking faithfully to witness to the person and work of Jesus Christ, against all the ideas that set themselves over against Christ—without anger, without malice, with respect, and an incredible, astute knowledge of the culture around him. Yet Paul was in the midst of a paradox. And that paradox was—his hands were tied, but his mouth was wide open. Listen to what God was doing, Acts chapter 28, verses 30 and 31.

For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ.

This is the Word of God. Thanks be to God. Will you join me again in prayer?

Father, we thank you for the testimony of the Book of Acts. We thank you, Lord, that Luke continued to write the testimony of what was taking place in the earliest parts of the church. We thank you, Lord, that we've been able to walk through this book, to be able to see in many ways that the Book of Acts is the tale of two cities. What began with 120 people in a house in Jerusalem would end with a great prophet of Paul, announcing Christ, teaching Christ, in the capitol of the world, of Rome. Lord, you are a great God, capable of doing great things beyond our imagination, against all which we think is certain, against all which we think is implausible. Lord, with you, all things are possible, for you have raised your

Son from the dead. Lord, if you raised your Son from death in the middle of history, then that tells us you are not done surprising us. Will you continue, by your Spirit and your Word, to surprise us? Now help us, we pray, in your Word. In Jesus' name. Amen.

“Men assumed that women couldn't play. Winning solved that problem.” This was a sentence written by a friend of mine, who was writing a little bit of a history of basketball, using it as a metaphor. He wrote these words:

In 1891, James Naismith invented basketball for men. A few miles away from Naismith was Smith College for Girls in Northampton, Massachusetts. In 1892, a physical education teacher named Senda Berenson introduced women to the game. This sounded implausible to men, since many—that is, men—many, and perhaps some women, were certain that women were more “selfish” and not as “team-oriented” as men.

My friend surmises, “Certainty can be a very scary thing. It can make reality sound implausible.” Certainty can be a scary thing. It can make reality sound implausible. What was certain to James Naismith, and what was certain to many men, and perhaps even women, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, is that women couldn't play basketball. They were certain of that, and then that enabled them to see reality according to their certainty, even though what they believed was completely and utterly implausible.

In case there are some here who doubt—on December 21<sup>st</sup>, 2010, the University of Connecticut women's basketball team won its 89<sup>th</sup> consecutive game. The women's Connecticut Huskies would go on to win ten NCAA National Division Championships, sixteen Final Four births, forty Big East and AAC regular season and tournament championships. They actually would go on, in 2010, to reach 90 consecutive winning games. They went year after year going 39 and 0. The Huskies have the most consecutive wins in Division 1 basketball history, eclipsing all men's basketball including the marks set by UCLA, led by the coach John Wooden, who headed 88 consecutive games. Greg Wooden, John Wooden's grandson, was there when Yukon broke that record that UCLA had set. And he said this about his grandfather. He said, “My grandfather would have been so pleased to see this record broken. Especially he was fond of Yukon's commitment to teamwork. In the last ten years of his life, he thought the best basketball at the collegiate level wasn't at the men's level.” He went on to note that his grandfather wasn't a fan of the slam dunk. “Any sane person today would find it perfectly sensible that women play a more unselfish game than men, and are more team-oriented.”

What changed? What was once believed to be implausible? Winning. That's what changed it. Year after year, game after game, they just kept winning. Winning changes the equation, and oftentimes, winning is fundamental to impacting the world. This was actually a paradox of John Wooden's coaching style itself. Wooden, his players said, never, ever talked about winning. Yet we would not be talking about John Wooden if he hadn't won.

Paul preached and taught that which the world believed to be implausible—that God became flesh, made his dwelling among us, lived and walked and taught and had disciples, was killed outside of Jerusalem on a cross, was buried, and was raised on the third day, and then appeared to Paul and blinded him. Being regenerated and converted, Paul would go from a chief persecutor to its chief preacher. It was completely implausible. It is completely certain that the dead do not rise to life. It is certain that God does not become man. It is certain that the Jews would not ever put God on a cross. But these things have been testified to.

Why are we still talking about what Paul said? It's because Paul won. He made it to Jerusalem. He made it to Rome. Against all odds. God told him that he would make it, but he would be there in chains. Paul won, because God was winning. God is still winning, but he's not winning with a flashy slam-dunk. He's not winning in a way that necessarily we can put up on a scoreboard. I want to say to you who are Christians today that we are far closer to the world that Paul faced in Rome than we are to the United States of America of 100 years ago. Are we still living mentally as if America was like it was 100 years ago,

or hoping that it could be reinstated? The United States of America will never be as it was in the past. It will never be reinstated. Christianity will very likely never, ever be the chief religion in the United States, because it is not today. Unbelief is. Everything we preach in this pulpit, and everything we teach to our children, all the things that we find so cuddly and fuzzy and warm, are indeed completely implausible to many of our neighbors. If we fail to live with that reality, we will not be able to live out the gospel in a way that becomes plausible. Paul, in his most difficult circumstances, facing what is arguably the most terrorizing leader ever to lead Rome, and that is Nero—he found himself in a paradoxical situation. What did he do? What should we do? What are you so certain of, that indeed may in fact be not certain? In fact, it may be wrong? And how does this help us live today?

But I also want to say this, that even though Paul was preaching, and even though Paul had those visiting him, he was still persecuted to the point of death just barely two years after he wrote and testified to the things given to us here. Just because he had the freedom to speak, just because he was, in essence, winning, he reached Rome, didn't mean everybody believed what he had to say. Nor will everyone believe what this church teaches. But what does the Lord want to teach us? What has he been teaching us in the Book of Acts? Hopefully I can summarize it in a helpful way without keeping you here until three. So mindful of the time—I have less than 15 minutes. Let's go. We have two points. First, his hands are tied. Secondly, his mouth is open.

His hands are tied. Paul is in a difficult predicament. He has been for some chapters now. Consider Paul's predicament. John Stott in his commentary on the Book of Acts summarized Paul's situation this way:

He was arrested in Jerusalem, subjected to endless trials, imprisoned in Caesarea, threatened with assassination by his fellow Jews, then nearly drowned in the Mediterranean, almost killed by soldiers and poisoned by a snake. Each incident seemed to be designed to prevent him from reaching his God-planned, God-promised destination.

The reality is that Scripture is full of examples of the ways in which the devil uses people and even natural phenomena to try to counter God's actions, whether it be a snake bite, almost drowning in a storm at sea, or, if you will, the human machinations of schemes, plots, and threats. The reality is, Scripture is full of the ways in which the devil is seeking to thwart God's saving purpose through his people and his Christ. He tried through Pharaoh to drown the baby Moses, through Haman to annihilate the Jews, through Herod the great to destroy the infant Jesus and Bethlehem, and through the Sanhedrin to stifle the apostolic witness and smother the church at its birth. And now, through the storm at sea, he attempted to stop Paul bringing his gospel to the capitol of the world.

Everything that God had promised had come true, but there was one aspect that Jesus—at least, the angel of the Lord—did not reveal to Paul when he promised him he would reach Rome. Oh, by the way, you're going to be in chains. Paul's predicament is, I will say to you, if you are a Christian sitting here before me—this is the worst possible scenario. Many Christians face this scenario around the world. Indeed, some are facing it today under the control of ISIS. They're being asked whether they will recant their faith. They're being held in bondage, mistreated, having to face trial and certain death. This is a very bad situation for Paul. Nero, if you go back in your history books, was one of the worst. He delighted in torturing and killing Christians.

Paul knew what lay before him. He understood his predicament. But he also understood something, and this is of value to us, and this is something we've talked about through the Book of Acts—that despite Paul's predicament, with his hands being tied, there was also God's providence. We have seen over and over and over again that the greatest opposition can make the sharpest tools. Later this week, I have to change my lawn mower blades. My lawn mower blades have gotten dull. I can tell, because as my grass begins to grow, it has that little bit of a less-than-a-millimeter on the top of my grass that's jagged and brown. I know that my blade is dull. It still does the job, but the only way that I'm going

to be able to sharpen that blade is not by holding it with a nice, soft rag. It's going to take metal on metal to sharpen it. The opposition which Paul faced made him one of the sharpest tools in God's quiver.

Consider for just a moment what Paul would accomplish in these two years of his predicament—that God's providence did not see Paul's imprisonment as an impediment. You like that? Imprisonment as an impediment? He didn't see it as an impediment. To doing what? Prophesying and telling and preaching who Christ is. Why? Because in these two years, Paul would write the following books that many of you, and particularly this church, hold dear. First, Ephesians was written during this two-year captivity. Philippians, Colossians, and the pastoral letter of Philemon. If you think about just those four books—if you had no other books, if you are a Christian, and could have only four, or even just one—any one of those would do. Their power and richness, their depth of reflection, is overwhelming. And yet they were written while Paul was in his predicament of being in jail, in his own rented house—which, by the way, he had to pay for, which meant he was doing to some degree some sort of tent-making. While receiving all of these people who would come, he would still go day after day, teaching and prophesying about the kingdom of God, and yet he would also write by his own hand his prison letters, as they are known. His hands were tied, his predicament severe, but God's incredible provision, his providence in the face of opposition, would serve to sharpen Paul's gospel—the clarity, the beauty of the gospel of Christ. Praise be to God.

If you are a Christian sitting here, and you are afraid of what the future may hold for the church in the United States, two things I would say to you. First, your fear may be well-founded. Who knows? If the Lord does not return 50 years from now, it may be seen as an incredibly illegal thing to say much of what we say from this pulpit. It may be that we would lose our tax status if we fail to adhere to the sexual definitions of our day—and that's far more than just homosexual marriage. If preaching the moral precepts of Scripture born out of the gospel, not the way to the gospel—all of God's moral precepts are an outworking of the gospel, not the way into it. But even if we teach the implications of the gospel and their moral precepts, they may someday be illegal for me to say. And we may suffer as a result. While that may be perhaps in our future, let none of us fall very far from the words that we read here. It did not dull the gospel. It actually made it more sharp. It actually made it more clear. It actually began to deepen what it means to walk with Christ by faith, regardless of what the predicament is in our daily circumstances.

Fearful, maybe. Wise might be the better word. But anxiety? Christian, be anxious for nothing, but in thanksgiving make your request to God. And what does Paul say? Rejoice. I will say it again, rejoice. Those words were written by a man in prison. I don't want to beat a dead horse, but—wow. His hands were tied, but our Saviors' is free. Christ has defeated death. He has defeated sin. And he's made a body, a group of children, a kingdom of priests, out of those who were once his enemies. Jesus would say from the cross, Lord, forgive them, for they know not what they do. Paul would say, do not judge those in the world. That is up to the Lord. But rather, judge among yourselves, in all humility—I'm summarizing—according to the gospel.

The beauty is, while our hands might be in chains, our mouths might be forced or try to be forced to recant what we believe, what worse nightmare could you imagine, whatever the case may be—but Jesus has won. And all that which may seem implausible to the world will one day be shown to be the fallacy that it is. But our role is to walk in humility, regardless of predicament, trusting not in our gifts or even our perception, but trusting alone in the providence of God, because God will use opposition to make very, very sharp tools for his glory and for the kingdom.

But secondly, his mouth was open. He taught two things. One, he taught boldly, the passage tells us, of the kingdom of God. And it says he taught of Jesus Christ. There's not a sharp distinction between the preaching and the teaching. They're meant to be synonymous. He's just giving the content. Paul was definitely, as we've heard throughout the Book of Acts, preaching on the breaking in of God into history—not as a warrior king, not as a king who comes with a sword, but as a King who comes in all humility to die on a cross for sinners, to stand and to be in our place. And that the kingdom of God broke in, and that

the kingdom of God walked in our midst in the person of Jesus Christ throughout all of his days. And then, he would teach about the person and work of Christ, of all that Christ is, and what he would go to do on the cross for you and me. Every one of his primary prison letters begin, the first half is talking about what Christ has done, and then he finishes by saying, because that is true, this is who we are to be. Consider for just a brief moment one of the most beautiful openings in all of his pastoral epistles:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding. 9 And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment—to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ. [Ephesians 1:3-10]

Paul wrote and taught these things day in, day out, to those who visited him. His hands were tied, but his mouth was open. And this Word is the Word that is preserved for us. By the power of the Holy Spirit, this Word has been recorded, and we have close copies of everything which is written here, and that has been preserved throughout the ages through the blood and the work of martyrs who've given themselves, and been translated into almost every language known to man. This Word is given to you. This is an example of how paradox is not impossible for God—that though Paul was in chains, God was doing a great thing.

Let me ask you this morning, as you look at your life and your own predicament, what are you so certain of that you have colored reality and you believe God cannot do it? What are you whispering in your own hearts is too great for God? Are you thinking maybe it's your own sin? Is it maybe the sin of somebody else? Is it maybe something that you're fearing that if it comes true, will destroy you? Will hurt you? Will judge you? Will break you? God makes a habit of turning that which man sees as implausible to very much possible and, indeed, real.

God is not done working. But the beauty of the end of Acts is that it ends almost like—is it an ellipsis where you do the four dots after? Right? Is that an ellipsis, Kate? Okay, thank you. Just making sure. So an ellipsis it almost ends a sentence, and we're supposed to fill in the blank. I mean, it just ends with, he was preaching and teaching Jesus Christ and the kingdom of God for two whole years. And then, period. And you're like, that's it? Isn't there more? What hadn't happened yet? Maybe Luke wasn't there. Or maybe Luke had a literary purpose. I'll end it here, because God is not done yet. Because this Word would be copied and shared around the churches, and the churches would take that Word and teach it, memorize it, love it, read it out loud. But what maybe they couldn't see—God knew that guided by the Holy Spirit, there would be multiple copies, and copies upon copies, and those would be spread around, and for the last 2,000 years would reach the point where you and I can now have the Bible in whatever format we want—audible, in writing, on a screen, small, large, whatever, searchable, it doesn't matter. In just a millisecond, you can find out things that would have taken a lifetime for people to know.

I think one reason why the Book of Acts ends the way it does—it is because God means for us to take this Word and say, it's now yours. What are we doing with the Word of God? How are we, day in, day out, seeking to understand how the kingdom of God is being displayed in my life and the world around me? How and in what ways can my life teach and show the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, his death on a cross, his resurrection on the third day, and his surely coming again? How is my life reflecting that truth? Some of you might say, well, that seems incredibly implausible, that God would want to do anything through the likes of us. I'm fearful. Look at the world around us. Christians are being imprisoned. We're afraid of what freedoms we might lose in the years to come.

Dear Christian, the Lord is not dead. He is very much alive. He is not afraid of our future. He is the future, because He is. And he means to work in us, in the midst of our predicament, the providence of his power, his grace, and his mercy—to give us the kingdom of God that we who praise and profess his name are examples of what God can do with sinners to make us children, and then to send us out with feet and hands and tongues to serve Christ and to make him known wherever we are. This is what God is doing, and will do until he comes again. Because God would say to twelve disciples that were then 120 Christians in chapter one of Acts, would blow on them the Holy Spirit, and then the world would know. And then it would end with Paul, in the capitol of the known world, against all which the world saw as implausible, preaching and teaching Christ. And we are the recipients.

What will we do with the gift? The Lord has called us to be witnesses—Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the uttermost parts of the world—regardless of predicament, because of the power of his providence and the victory of his Son. Paul's paradox is the example of our God's power. Receive it. Believe in it. For our God is good. Let's pray.

O Lord our Lord, how majestic is your Name in all the earth. No one matches you. You are majestic, and as we've heard our children say, you, O Lord, are good, and your character is sterling. Lord, we are mere human beings made in your image, given to be tempted by the difficulty of our predicament. Yet your Word tells us over and over again, Lord, you are the God of the impossible, and you are not done working. We pray two things, O Lord. One, we pray that you, O Lord, would make your Name great in the world, and use the likes of us to be humble servants of Christ. But secondly, Lord, we ask you that all of those in the world, even those who are our neighbors and our friends, maybe even our family members, and even those, perhaps, who are sitting here this morning—Lord, we would pray, just as you have called us to yourself, may those who do not know you be called to your great gift, your salvation, for this is your glory. This is your intention—to make a kingdom out of those who were once your enemies. Lord, please do this for your glory. Give us wisdom and discernment. Give us humility and grace as we seek to follow you, for you are a great God, full of power. In Jesus' name. Amen.