And Finally…
Acts 28:11-31

So, we've reached the end of Acts. And I want to remind you how it all began. Jesus, risen from the dead, said to the disciples in Acts chapter 1: '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' (Acts 1:8).

And we've seen how that was what happened. Beginning in Jerusalem, there was this wave of evangelism, through Judea and Samaria, up into modern-day Turkey and across into Greece, as the disciples took the gospel out. A message that should have died with the death of Jesus, unknown beyond his little country in the backwoods of the Roman Empire, and yet it spread like wildfire, and as it did so, it turned the world upside down.

And now it's 60AD, 30 years or so years after Jesus' resurrection. And Paul and his little team have survived a shipwreck, and have spent the winter on the island of Malta. But with the arrival of Spring, they are on the move again and heading for Rome. And of course for Paul, and for Luke who's writing Acts, Rome, the capital of the world, is the beginning of the ends of the earth. Because if all roads lead to Rome, as the saying goes, they also spread out from Rome. And as Paul heads to Rome, it's in anticipation of yet further spread beyond Rome.

And it was the significance of Rome that helps explain something of Paul's passion to get there. Listen to what he wrote to the Christians in Rome, some 3 years before: Romans 1: 'For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you. For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you' (Rom 1:9-11).

Now, when Paul wrote that he was a pretty hardened and experienced traveller and minister. But even so, I wonder whether he would have been surprised had he known that the will of God to get him to Rome would include false accusation, near death at the hands of a lynch mob, trial before corrupt judges, being used in powerplays between rulers, being chained as a criminal, and finally shipwreck. It's a reminder, isn't it, that when we become followers of Jesus, there is no promise of comfort, but every promise that his will for us will succeed against all the odds and every circumstance.

And so Paul arrives in Rome, where he is still chained as a prisoner. And yet, the remarkable thing is that, even though he's chained, as he would later write, 'bound with chains as a criminal… the word of God is not bound' (2 Tim 2:9). He's chained, but the gospel isn't. In fact, Luke ends Acts by telling us that Paul continued to proclaim the gospel, v31 'with all boldness and *without hindrance*.'

Now how come? How come Paul is chained and yet the gospel isn't? How come, despite all the seeming roadblocks and hindrances to Paul continuing to spread the gospel can Luke write that he was bold and unhindered? Because this is of more than academic interest isn't it? After all, if you're a Christian, you're job might hinder you from sharing your faith. I don't just mean the workload it puts

on you, I mean the culture of the office, or the rules against proselytising. And whilst you don't wear Paul's physical chains, yet you do feel chained in your ability to evangelise. And that's without even mentioning the fear and embarrassment and lack of skill you might feel at the mere thought of doing it. And frankly, you'd have to be a hermit not to know that there are growing hindrances to proclaiming the gospel in our own day. The city of Geneva making it more and more difficult to do any form of public outreach, the universities here clamping down on Christian activities, the media giving disproportionate airtime to the new atheists who have never even seriously engaged with what the Bible actually says.

So if Paul was chained but was still able to be bold and unhindered, how did he do it, and what can we learn from him?

The first thing I want to look at is…

Paul's Confidence

Look at what Luke says in v24: 'some were convinced by what he said, but others disbelieved.' So, having arrived in Rome, Paul had gathered all the Jewish leaders to present the gospel to them. But not all of them were persuaded, were they? Some were convinced, but others weren't. And then, in v25, Luke tells us that these same leaders left their meeting with Paul, 'disagreeing among themselves.' So, it's not as if Paul presents the gospel and everyone goes, "that's great, where do I sign?" Even *Paul* couldn't persuade everyone, and even when *Paul* presented the gospel it caused division and disagreement. And of course that fear of rejection – of people thinking you're crazy, or turning their back on you, or the fear of causing upset because the gospel is divisive, are potentially some of the very reasons why you and I might be reluctant to share the gospel with others.

And yet, despite the rejections, and despite the division it caused, Paul didn't give up, but carried on with boldness. So… where did that confidence come from?

Well, firstly there's a confidence that comes from just seeing the gospel doing its work in people's lives. Look at what Luke says in v15, as Paul is making his way to Rome in chains: 'And the brothers there [that's Rome], when they heard about us, came as far as the Forum of Appius and Three Taverns to meet us. On seeing them, Paul thanked God and took courage.'

These Roman Christians walked 40 or more miles to meet Paul. And when he saw their love and concern for him it gave him courage. Because he knew that what he was doing was worth it. That the gospel really does do what it says on the tin. It really does transform people, and cause them to love and serve and sacrifice, and walk 40miles for a Christian brother in chains, rather than just live selfishly.

And Paul knew that if the gospel was powerful enough to change him and others, then it was worth proclaiming even when it met with rejection and opposition. And you can know that too.

But I reckon the second thing that gave him confidence to keep going was a strong sense of the sovereignty of God. We saw last week how God was sovereign over the storm and the bad decisions of others. And Paul knew that God had called him to take the gospel to Rome. But when you know that God is working out his purposes despite opposition it can give you confidence. And when you go one step further and realise that God is working out his purposes *through* your suffering, not just inspite of it, it gives you boldness. And that's what Paul knew.

Listen to what he wrote to the Christians in Philippi, and he wrote this from his prison here in Rome: 'I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear' (Phil 1:12-14).

So Paul could see that it was precisely his imprisonment, the opposition that he had faced for the sake of the gospel, that God was using to spread the gospel, not just to the average guy on the street, but right into Roman army itself. Because it wasn't a wall Paul was chained to, but a Roman soldier, who would be chained to him for four hours at a stretch. Talk about a captive audience! And Paul would never have got an audience with Caesar to talk about Jesus. You didn't just walk up to Nero's palace and ring the doorbell! But as a prisoner who had appealed to Caesar he could speak to Caesar. It was precisely his imprisonment that served as his security pass that allowed him to preach the gospel right at the centre of the Empire, to Caesar himself.

And Paul knew that, and it made him bold, and the Christians around him saw that and it made them bold, and so they joined in the gospel spreading. So listen, you may never know why God allows you to face some of the stuff you face. Sure it may not be imprisonment for the sake of Christ, but it may be any one of a million other forms of suffering – but it may just be to get you in, to give you a pass, an opening into the lives of others. So like Paul, we must never waste our suffering.

But Paul even sees the rejection of the gospel by these Jewish leaders as the opportunity for further expansion of the gospel. He reminds them of the words of Isaiah the prophet, that they are being just like their fathers before them: their hearts are dull, their ears are deaf and their eyes are blind. And though we know from Romans 9 that the rejection of the gospel by Jewish people deeply grieved Paul, it didn't cause him to lose hope and give up. Rather, v28, he says, "Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen." You might reject it and oppose it, but I know others won't. So Paul didn't see rejection and opposition as a closed door, but as God opening wide the door to others, who would respond to the gospel.

And that's the third place Paul finds his confidence: it's a confidence in the power of the gospel itself. It's why Paul could write to these Christians in Rome 3 years

before: 'I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek' (Rom 1:16).

So, let's look at what message he proclaimed.

Paul's Message.
Well, one of the first things Paul tells these Jewish leaders is that, v20, "It is because of the hope of Israel that I am wearing this chain." In other words, 'guys listen, this message that I'm proclaiming, and that I'm in prison for, is not some kind of deviation from or assault on our Jewish faith. It's the absolute opposite. It's the fulfilment of every thing we ever hoped for as Jews, it's the answer to all God's promises to us throughout all our history. And it's all about Jesus."

Verse 23, '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.' Verse 31, 'proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ.' So Paul took them to the Bible, the Old Testament and said look, here in Genesis and the promise to Abraham, and here, God's covenant to David, and here in the Psalms, and look at what Isaiah said, and here, and here and here. And it's all about Jesus. And how the rule and the reign of God, his kingdom, had broken in to this age of ours.

And so Paul kept Jesus, and all that God has accomplished for us through Jesus, right at the centre. And I say that, because it is always so tempting to make something other than Jesus and his death and resurrection the focus. And you become focused on this or that issue and you think you have to convince others of this first, or as well as. But for Paul, this wasn't about politics, this wasn't about left versus right, this wasn't about sexual ethics or any other issue, ancient or modern. It was always about Jesus Christ and him crucified, main and centre.

And yet that message had and has profound implications for all these other issues: politics and left and right and sexual ethics and business ethics and all of life ethics. Look what the Jewish leaders say to Paul: v22, "We desire to hear from you what your views are, for with regard to this sect we know that *everywhere* it is spoken against." So, why was Christianity, why was the gospel spoken against everywhere? Because if right at the centre of the gospel is the *Lord* Jesus Christ, it means that nothing else has that place.

Listen to what Paul wrote to the Roman Christians: 'If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved' (Rom 10:9). Now what I want you to grasp is just how revolutionary that was. Because throughout the empire, but especially in Rome there was the cry Hail Caesar! Caesar is Lord! And the gospel comes and says, 'no he's not.' He's not your ultimate Lord. He can't save you. And your Roman idols are not the Lord either. And success, and career, and profit, and gain and politics, and sex, and entertainment and pleasure, they're not Lord, and you'll never find what you're really looking for in them. And finally, and perhaps most challenging of all, if Christ is the Lord, you're not. We're not self-governing islands, free to do whatever we want. Politicians and business leaders and society shapers, none of

us are the boss. And one day we will all be called to account, because it's Christ who's the Lord. But Paul did all of that, by keeping Jesus right at the centre.

So, that was what Paul put his confidence in and that was his message. Now what about his tactics?

Paul's tactics

Now, the danger of calling this Paul's tactics is it makes it sound manipulative, but Paul's *methods* just sounds too dull. So it's tactics!

So how did Paul go about persuading people of the truth of the gospel? Well, there are a number of things you could draw out here aren't there? He did what he always did and went to the Jews first. Luke tells us that he both taught and proclaimed: he went for people's heads as well as their hearts.

But I want to highlight something else here. Verse 30, 'He lived there two whole years at his own expense, *and welcomed all who came to him*.' Paul was under house arrest, chained to a guard, and yet the constraints on his life didn't stop him sharing his life with others. He welcomed people, he practised that wonderful art of hospitality. He had people over. He didn't just open the Bible, he opened himself, his life with people. As he wrote to the Thessalonians, 'We were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves' (1 Thess 2:8).

And his house and his life were open to Jews, the very people who had opposed him – so he bore no grudges, and to gentiles – people very different from him. He simply opened up his home and his life to help people meet Jesus. So, maybe for you it's time to have your neighbour round, or help them shovel some snow! Maybe it will mean listening to your friend's problem, and listening rather than talking! Maybe it will mean sharing something of your own problems or difficulties in life and being open with them, and then offering to pray for them or telling them how your faith has helped you cope with what they're facing. Maybe it will be having your non-Christian friends round for a meal with some of your Christian friends, and just start sharing life together.

However you do it, let's open our lives as we begin to open the book.

Which brings me to my final point:

What's it got to do with you?

And I want to finish like that because Acts finishes like that. The fascinating thing about this book is that it ends, but it doesn't end. It ends abruptly, and Paul's in Rome and under house arrest, but what happens next? Does he get to speak before Caesar or doesn't he? Is he martyred or is he released? Does he get to travel on to Spain, as his letters suggest he wanted to, or not? Luke doesn't tell us any of that. It just ends with us thinking, yes, but what comes next?

And the answer, of course, is that you come next. Because, ultimately, the story of Acts is not about Peter or James or John or Philip or Paul or Barnabas or Silas. It's

about how the good news of Jesus is taken by his disciples to the ends of the earth. And so Acts is a book that never ends, because the work of the Spirit of God just keeps on going, and you are invited to join in. You get to be Acts chapter 29, and 30 and 31, as we join in this life-long call to follow Jesus and spread the good news of all that God has done for us in Him. And the work of turning the world upside down just keeps on going.

And when you see it like that, you and I have a choice don't we? We can either join in with God's mission to see the fame of Jesus' name spread, we can either give to this work, and join with this work, with our time and our lives and our resources, opening our hands and our mouths and our homes and our lives, or we can be disobedient and miss out on all that God is doing. And you don't want to do that!

And to wrap up Acts I want to read you what Darrel Bock, an American NT professor writes of this ending of Acts, its last verse, that leaves us with Paul proclaiming and teaching the gospel, v31, 'with all boldness and without hindrance.' To that Bock writes, 'God is the hero of Acts. He will make sure it happens, and so will a faithful church.' So church, will you and I be faithful to the call to take the gospel out into the world that so desperately needs to hear that Jesus is Lord? I pray that we will.