

Our Place in God's Mission

SCOTT HOEZEE

Every once in a while when you are reading a novel or a short story, you know at some point that you are near the end; but then, when you finish a paragraph, you turn the page, expecting there to be more; but the next page is blank. What you had just read really had been the end of the story, and yet it feels oddly incomplete. You were just sure there was a bit more to come to round the story out better. The last thing you read cannot be the end, yet it is. Well, the book of Acts is like that. We get to the very end of Acts 28, and we want to turn the page to find the *real* ending of the story, but it is not there. Why might Acts end that way, and what might it imply for the Church yet today? Today on *Groundwork*, we will explore those questions. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and this is now, Dave, our last program. This has been a six-part series that we have been telling across sort of the season of Epiphany, which is what comes right after Christmas, and it focuses on the revelation of Christ—the Light of Christ—spreading throughout all the world; and so, we started in Matthew, but we mostly have been in the book of Acts, to see how the story of the Gospel spread from Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria, and ultimately more and more to the ends of the then-known world—the Greco-Roman world. So, we have been following the apostles, principally Paul, but we have been following the apostles as they move out and move out and move out; and in this program we are going to come to the very, very end of the book of Acts, when Paul finally arrives in the city of Rome, which had been a goal of his for a long time; and yet, as we will see, this book ends somewhat abruptly.

DAVE BAST

It ends very abruptly, and rather curiously at that. Scott, I do not think I had put this together before until I was going over the material for this program, but as you pointed out, there a number of biblical books...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

That end on an odd note, and not just Acts, but some others in the Old Testament as well as the New Testament.

SCOTT HOEZEE

One of the things we are going to want to notice is that when that happens...and we will look at a couple of them in just a sec...but when that happens, it usually is like an arrow pointing at us the reader to say: And...either stay tuned or get moving...

DAVE BAST

But I also find it comforting as a preacher, you know; if you are not quite sure how to wrap up a sermon, and you cannot put a nice bow on it...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

Not to worry, because some of the biblical writers did exactly the same thing.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So here are a few examples that many of us are probably familiar with: Genesis...the very first book of the Bible, obviously; mostly picking up starting in Genesis 12. We are looking at the story of the descendents of Abraham: Isaac, Jacob, and then on to the generation of Joseph and his brothers. We know the big covenant promise to Abraham was that they would have a promised land—the land of Canaan would be their home, but we also know that as Genesis proceeds near the end, there is a great famine. Joseph has landed in Egypt, ends up becoming like the governor, second only to the Pharaoh, and eventually the whole family...all of Jacob's family...move to Egypt so they can be fed...that is good, but they are not in the promised land; and the last line, interestingly...after Joseph dies in Genesis Chapter 50...the last line is that they take Joseph's body and they place it in a coffin in Egypt. That is the last line of Genesis...

DAVE BAST

The end; yes, the end.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is rather ominous.

DAVE BAST

But it is not the end, because Joseph made his brothers promise that their descendents would take him back to the promised land; so it is kind of an arrow pointing; even in death, Joseph is pointing back to the promise.

SCOTT HOEZEE

There is another book coming. It is called Exodus; keep reading, right?

DAVE BAST

Yes, yes; but here is another one. The little book of Jonah, which we have actually done a series on in *Groundwork*; the fourth chapter of Jonah ends with this ridiculous scene of Jonah being angry because his preaching succeeded, and the people of Nineveh repented, and he complains to... God, you are so merciful and gracious, and you forgave them. I am mad about it; and God comes back to him gently with a question. And so, the last verse of the book of Jonah is:

4:11 Should I not (the Lord is speaking) should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than one hundred twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left—and also much cattle? As the old version says...also many animals. God is even concerned for the animals; and that question just sort of dangles there at the end.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; we have no idea how Jonah answered it; we do not know if God got through to him. We know that Jonah is in a snit. He is angry that God let these Ninevites into the salvation club, even though it was his own preaching that did it; but it ends with a question mark, and there is no answer. Shouldn't I be concerned about them? And I think the implication is: Shouldn't you?

DAVE BAST

Yes, shouldn't you?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Of course we should. That is the implication, but it ends with a question mark; and then there is the Gospel of Mark, and that ends also sort of in freeze frame. We remember most scholars...just about everybody, actually, know that Mark ends at 16:8, and here is the line, right? These women have gone to the tomb, they meet this angel who says: Jesus is not here; he has gone ahead to Galilee. Go tell the disciples and Peter. Go to Galilee and you will meet him; but this is the last verse, Mark 16:8, referring to the women here: So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid. And that is the end of the Gospel?!

DAVE BAST

It is so unusual, in fact, that early on some anonymous Christians tried to write a better ending...a more helpful ending with resurrection appearances, and all the rest, and a form of the great commission; but most scholars today believe that that is really how Mark ended his Gospel; so again, it sort of throws it back at the reader: Are we going to be silent? Are we so afraid that we are not going to say anything to anybody, even though we know that Jesus has risen from the dead?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; if your reaction to Mark 16:8 is: That cannot be right. The Gospel cannot end in silence; it is like Mark is looking right back at you and saying: You are right...

DAVE BAST

Bingo!

SCOTT HOEZEE

Are you going to speak up? Hello, it is up to you now...

DAVE BAST

So, that brings us to the end of Acts Chapter 28. Now listen to the last two verses of the book of Acts: ³⁰Paul lived there (in Rome, this is) two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, ³¹proclaiming the kingdom of God, and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness, and without hindrance.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that is it. If you were tempted at that point, as we said in the beginning of this program, to turn the page to see what else Luke has to say to round out the story...

DAVE BAST

Yes, what's next?! What happened at his trial, Luke; did he get off? Did he get to Caesar?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Did he get to Caesar? Yes; I mean, there are all kinds of questions. It is very similar to the ending of the Gospel of Mark. We have sort of this freeze-frame image of these women, mouths opened, eyes wide with terror, fleeing the tomb; and that is sort of how we end here: Paul with his finger in the air, teaching about Jesus without hindrance; and that is it. It is sort of like, well...

DAVE BAST

The end.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The end. This was such an action-packed book. Luke is such a good writer, that to end with Paul just sort of in mid-frame, in mid-sentence almost, seems rather strange. Surely there is more to the story, and obviously there really was; and yet, this is where Luke chose to end that particular story; and as with all of the writers of scripture who ended ambiguously, Luke had a reason to end his book this way, and we will start to wonder what that reason is in just a moment.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, where today we are looking at the very end of the book of Acts. It is the last program in this series on Epiphany, on the spread of the Gospel; and we have seen that Paul has come to Rome, and Luke ends the book of Acts, the story of the Gospel going out into the world, rather abruptly; but let's just back up a moment before we dig into that final passage, and recall how Paul has come to Rome. As you said earlier, Scott, there is a lot of action in the book of Acts; and it is way back in Chapter 19 that Paul first announces his intention to go to Rome; and there are riots and he is taken prisoner, and they have to take him into protective custody in Jerusalem, and then this wonderful story in Acts 27, of the voyage to Rome, and there are storms and a shipwreck...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

And they almost die; and all of that finally gets Paul, you know, kind of beat and bedraggled, into the city, and there he settles in, into a rather comfortable custody; it is sort of a house arrest.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, that is what it looks like.

DAVE BAST

And he is free to share the Gospel with any and all who come.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And he does; and as we just saw in the last two verses of Acts 28, he is continuing to do that even as the book ends; but let's back up about ten verses to Acts 28:23. Here is one of the last incidents of what is going on in Rome. Here are some people who come to him:

After they had...these other people...had set a date to meet with him, they (these are some Jewish brothers) came to his lodgings in great numbers. From morning until evening, he explained the matter to them, testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus, both from the Law of Moses and the Prophets. ²⁴Some were convinced by what he said while others refused to believe. ²⁵So they disagreed with each other, and as they were leaving, Paul made one further statement: "The Holy Spirit was right in saying to your ancestors through the prophet Isaiah:

DAVE BAST

²⁶'Go to this people and say, "You will indeed listen, but never understand, and you will indeed look, but never perceive; ²⁷for this peoples' heart has grown dull and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes so that they might not look with their eyes and listen with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them.'" ²⁸Let it be known to you, then, that this salvation of God has been sent to the gentiles. They will listen."

SCOTT HOEZEE

Paul here talking to fellow Jews. Some of them believe, as has been happening all through Acts, and yet, there is this great resistance. So, here Paul is in the great gentile city of Rome; he has been mostly working in Greco-Roman cities like Philippi and Corinth. You know, in a previous program we saw him in Athens in

Greece witnessing to the Gospel, but his fellow Jews, who should be in the best position to recognize and accept Jesus as the Messiah...so many of them won't; and so Paul, as they are leaving...it is sort of this dramatic scene. They have argued all day. It has been morning, noon, and night, and now they are on their way out the door, and Paul says: Oh, one last thing: You remember when Isaiah said that you Jewish people are just going to be, you know, deaf and blind to the truth? That is you; so you are out and the gentiles are in; and that is a dramatic statement of some judgment, really.

DAVE BAST

It is also very difficult for us, and very painful, I think; or at least it ought to be...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

Especially in light of subsequent history—the history of anti-Semitism—the history of an increased hardening. In fact, by the time we get to the end of the New Testament, and the Gospel of John...one of the last books written in the New Testament, we think of that verse in the prologue of John: He came to his own people, and his own people received him not; but to as many as received him, he gave power to become children of God. So, there is a kind of tragic sense of the growing hardness and hostility... I mean, the Church started out one hundred percent Jewish. Think of the Day of Pentecost...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Three thousand people come to believe in Jesus, and thousands more after...

SCOTT HOEZEE

And they were almost all Jews...

DAVE BAST

Yes...

SCOTT HOEZEE

From all over the world...

DAVE BAST

Certainly...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

Yes, they were; and you know, Jesus was the Jewish Messiah, and yet, there is this tragic sense as the New Testament progresses that more and more Jews are hardening against him, as they see more gentiles flooding in. They are being overwhelmed, and Paul sees this, really, as confirmation of prophecy—the prophecy of Isaiah.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, but of course, for Paul...so, he makes this rather harsh statement, basically saying: You are out; gentiles are in; sorry. But that is not really the end of the story, even for Paul. In his own heart of hearts, we know that when Paul wrote the letter to the Romans, which he probably did before this happened...but still, in his heart

of hearts, he is even using those words of Isaiah, I think, in a last ditch hope that they will still turn around—they will stop in the doorway and come back to want to hear more, because, you know...

DAVE BAST

Which is probably why Isaiah wrote them in the first place. He probably was doing the same thing.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is right.

DAVE BAST

Hey, look at what you are doing.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we know that in Romans 9, 10, and 11, this agonizing section of Romans, where Paul is wondering aloud, agonizing with himself: What is going to become of my own people now that they do not really want to take Jesus as the Messiah? He writes many things there, but let's just quote briefly from Romans 11, so we know that those lines in Acts 28 were not the end of the matter.

Paul writes: ²⁵So that you may not claim to be wiser than you are, brothers and sisters, I want you to understand this mystery. A hardening has come upon part of Israel until the full number of the gentiles has come in; ²⁶and so, all Israel will be saved...(and then he goes on)...²⁸As regards the Gospel they are enemies of God for your sake, but as regard to election, they are beloved for the sake of their ancestors, ²⁹for the gifts and the callings of God are irrevocable.

And so, Paul is saying...

DAVE BAST

Yes, they are never taken back.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; there is still hope...there is still hope...they are still God's covenant people. Somehow, God is going to work this out. So, the bottom line there...and this comes out really in Romans 10...is do not stop preaching, including to the people who have, at least initially, rejected God. Keep preaching.

DAVE BAST

So, that is what Paul himself does; and I think that brings us back to the end of Acts Chapter 28. It is no accident that when Paul has finally reached the city of Rome, in a sense, the Gospel has reached its goal; because as we said several times in the course of this series, Acts 1:8 is the program—it is the plan—it is the table of contents: To Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth; and Rome, in a real sense, represents the ends of the earth. There was an ancient saying: All roads lead to Rome...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

And there was a golden milepost in the Forum, where all the roads...it was mile marker zero; but if all roads came *to* Rome, then from Rome, roads led to everywhere...

SCOTT HOEZEE

To the ends of the earth.

DAVE BAST

And that means that Paul symbolically in Luke's account in reaching Rome and continuing to preach the Gospel right up until the last verse, he has shown that the Gospel is reaching out, and it will continue to reach out as long as that preaching goes on.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And so, let's go back now as we close out this program in just a moment, to those last two verses and think about what that means for the Church even today.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; so, we noted, Dave...we were just saying that the book of Acts...the book itself does not so much end as it just stops. We read these in the first segment of this program, but let's hear it again:

Acts 28:30, 31; these are the last two verses of Acts:

³⁰Paul lived in Rome two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him; ³¹

proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness, and without hindrance.

DAVE BAST

So notice what it says he is teaching. I mean, we have said several times Paul is standing there with his finger in the air and he is preaching and teaching. He is not teaching and preaching two different subjects. It is not kingdom of God in the morning, and the Lord Jesus Christ in the afternoon. Those things are intertwined. When Paul proclaims the kingdom, he is announcing the coming of the King, and the kingdom of God is the rule of Jesus, wherever that takes root in our lives, in our communities, in our societies. So, this is one full-blown statement of the Gospel that in Jesus Christ...not just that we are saved from our sins, or that we get to go to heaven when we die, but God's kingdom has come among us and God's rule is being realized in our lives and in our homes and families and churches and towns and cities and villages wherever Jesus is honored and obeyed as King.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is really quite remarkable, too, when we think about it. It is easy to forget this, but at this point, as the book of Acts ends and Paul is in Rome, none of the gospels have been written down yet. Paul's letters have been written...probably most all of them. Peter and James and John are writing some letters. Those are the earliest writings of what we have in the New Testament. The gospels came later; Acts was written later; but already, at such an early point in the early Church, Paul has got it all down by the Holy Spirit's revelation: The kingdom of God, the Gospel, the Truth of Jesus Christ as the Messiah, it is all right there. Everything we still hold dear today. We have nothing new today; we have the message of the Apostles once delivered to the saints, and that has been the message of the Church for two millennia; and as long as we are faithful, that is going to be the message for however long history continues.

DAVE BAST

Absolutely; it is also interesting, I think, to notice how Acts ends; literally the last word in the book of Acts is translated in our version...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Without hindrance...

DAVE BAST

With all boldness and without hindrance; so, it is not only *what* Paul was preaching and teaching, but *how* he was doing it. He is doing it boldly and *ak?lyt?s*, literally, the last word *without hindrance*. It is unbound, it is unchained; you cannot stop it. All that has gone on to try to keep Paul from arriving at Rome, God has overruled all that; and God's Word cannot be bound, as Paul would say in one of his letters: I may be in chains, I may be sitting here under house arrest with a guard shackled to me, beside me, but people are

coming and they are hearing, and you cannot chain the Word of God—you cannot stop it—it is unstoppable.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And as we said earlier, this reminds us of the book of Jonah; it reminds us of the Gospel of Mark; stories that sort of end almost in mid sentence with what we might call an ellipsis. An ellipsis is three dots...when a story trails off, you know...you kind of think about a story of a man who is going to ask a woman to marry him, right; and so, you know, you read the story: And so, he looked deep into her eyes and said: So, how about it? Will you marry me? She looked back at him, and as a little smile began to curl at the corners of her mouth, she said... That is called an ellipsis.

DAVE BAST

What did she say?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, you figure it out.

DAVE BAST

You write in the answer, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And this is sort of how Jonah ends, sort of how Mark ends, and it is how Acts ends. Paul preaches with boldness, and without hindrance... And the implication is, are you doing that, reader...or reader, is the Church in subsequent ages who read this, are you continuing what we see Paul, almost in mid sentence, was doing; it is up to you now. Paul is left kind of suspended in midair, but are you carrying on his mission now, talking about the kingdom of God and teaching the truth about Jesus Christ?

DAVE BAST

Yes, and we would love to know what happened to Paul. He had talked about a plan of going to Spain ultimately, of getting the Romans to help him along with his missionary career; and Church tradition...early Christian legend says that that did happen; that Paul was acquitted and he did travel to Spain, and then he came back to Rome, and a couple of years later he was executed under Nero by being beheaded, but Luke does not tell us that...

SCOTT HOEZEE

No.

DAVE BAST

Luke stops with this ellipsis, as you said, Scott, with the..., almost as if to say: You know what? Gospel ministers come and go, but the Gospel goes on. It needs to go on, and the question is, are we going to jump in and help that happen, too?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, that is a very interesting point. Just as you were talking now, Dave, that had not occurred to me before. It is sort of Luke's way of saying: Look, there is nobody in the history of the New Testament, nobody in the book of Acts who is more important than the Apostle Paul; but in the end, Luke is saying he is not that important...

DAVE BAST

Yes, it is not Paul's story...Acts is not Paul's story...

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, what happens to Paul? Luke is basically saying: Who cares? Paul would not want you to be too concerned about what happened to him. I mean, look at how he wrote in some of his letters, you know. He

wants to die and go to be with Christ. It is far better. He knows the truth. Paul is not important. How Paul's story turns out is not important. How Jesus' story turns out as it continues now in the Church, that is very, very important. Continue to do, O Church, what you see Paul doing at the end. Paul is not important; his actions are important; and it kind of reminds me, too, you can almost hear in the background as Acts concludes with Paul kind of in mid sentence, finger in the air, teaching and preaching... Paul's letter to the Philippians in Philippians Chapter 4:

DAVE BAST

⁸Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable...sounds like the kingdom of God, doesn't it?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

If anything is excellent or praiseworthy, think about such things. ⁹Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me or seen in me, put it into practice, and the God of peace will be with you. That is really, I think, what Luke is pointing toward, too.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

Put it into practice. I heard recently, Scott, about a church planting network in the United States that calls itself Acts 29; and I like that. Acts 28 ends with the Gospel going out boldly and without hindrance and Paul kind of carrying on no matter what happens to him. Acts 29, that is where we are living, and the question is: How about it? Are we being about it?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, that is great; Acts 29, I had not heard that before; I like that. Yes, whatever you have seen in me, Paul says, put it into practice; and that is our mission to the world. Dave, you said a few minutes ago, Acts 1:8 was like the table of contents for the book of Acts: from Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, to the ends of the earth; and we are still pushing to the ends of the earth. We keep putting the Gospel into practice. We keep teaching, we keep preaching, hopefully without hindrance, but even where we have hindrance, we keep it up. That is what this whole series has been about. We keep preaching to the whole world until the knowledge of God covers the world like the waters cover the seas.

DAVE BAST

Amen! Well, thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Dave Bast with Scott Hoezee, and we hope you will join us again next time as we continue to dig deeply into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. Connect with us at groundworkonline.com to let us know what passages or topics you would like to hear discussed on *Groundwork*.

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