

The Unchained Gospel

DAVE BAST

The Apostle Paul would be the first to admit life's circumstances can go out of control, but how we react to them is always within our control. When we trust in God's providence and take an active role in our situations, God can do big things for us, and more importantly, for the Gospel. Today on *Groundwork*, we look at the end of Paul's story in the book of Acts in order to help us better understand this great truth.

SCOTT HOEZEE

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

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast, and Scott, now we have come to the last in this series of seven programs. We have kind of hopped, skipped, and jumped our way through Acts. It is not like we did a thorough job, but we have hit many of the wonderful highlights, and we are going to do the last couple of chapters now in this program, and they all have to do with the drama of Paul's final journey to the city of Rome, and what he did when he got there.

SCOTT HOEZEE

As we have been saying, starting in Acts 1 when Jesus ascended into heaven, and then in Acts 2 on the Day of Pentecost, the story – it keeps getting wider and wider. We started out right in Jerusalem; right in Judea; then we moved out to Samaria; then we moved out even farther to Italy and there are all kinds of different places. Paul's missionary journeys have taken him to Asia Minor, what we call Turkey today; Greece; all over the place, but Paul has this burning desire to get to Rome. Probably one of his, if not the greatest letter in the New Testament, is the one to the Romans, writing to people he had not seen yet. He keeps saying: I gotta get there; I gotta get there; I gotta get there! And yet, he keeps getting hindered from getting there. He keeps getting thrown in jail; he keeps getting turned around. It seems like, if he is ever going to get there, it is going to be in a rather roundabout way, and roundabout is exactly what we get at the very end of Acts in what we are looking at today: Chapters 27 and 28.

DAVE BAST

Right; but first, let's skip all the way back and dip into Chapter 19. This is ten chapters, now, from the end, and there is a little reference there where Paul has been in Ephesus and preaching the Gospel there. He actually stayed there longer than anywhere else as far as we know – about three years – in planting the church in Ephesus, which was a great and important city on the west coast of Turkey. Then we read in verse 21: After all this had happened, Paul decided to go the Jerusalem, passing through Macedonia and Achaia, (that is, Greece) and then he said, "After I have been there, I must visit Rome also."

So here we have a little checkpoint along the way, where Paul lays out his next itinerary. So, he says – and this is what we call now his fourth missionary journey that he is going to make. He wraps up the third journey by passing again through Greece from Ephesus. Beginning in Ephesus, he goes and revisits Greece and then on to Jerusalem, and then from there he says, "I want to go to Rome." But, things took an unexpected turn in Jerusalem.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Lots of roadblocks and so forth, and eventually Paul is arrested and he – we will not have time to go over all of this, but you can read about it in Acts 25 and 26 – ends up in front somebody named Festus and ends up in front of somebody named Agrippa. Some of them like to listen to Paul, so he uses the opportunity to talk about Jesus as much as he can, but finally, Paul really wants to get to Rome, and so he goes for broke at one point and says: Look, you know what? I am a Roman citizen. If you guys are going to keep me in jail, or you want to arrest me or try me, then it has to be before Caesar, because I am a citizen. Then their hands are tied: Well, no choice to – we might have even set him free, it says at the end of 26, but he appealed to Caesar, so what can we do? We are legally bound – ship him off to Rome, literally; put him on a ship and send him to Italy.

DAVE BAST

And the trip starts out quite nicely. So, we pick it up in Acts 27:13:

When a gentle south wind began to blow, they saw their opportunity, so they weighed anchor and sailed along the shore of Crete. They have already gone partway – actually, it is getting late in the season and Paul suggests to the captain: Hey, you know, maybe it would be a good idea if we just waited until spring. But, no, no, no; we want to get going. ¹⁴Before very long, a wind of hurricane force, called the nor'easter, swept down from the island. ¹⁵The ship was caught by the storm and could not head into the wind so we gave way to it and were driven along. ¹⁶As we passed to the lee of a small island called Clauda, we were hardly able to make the lifeboat secure. ¹⁷So the men hoisted it aboard. Then they passed ropes under the ship itself to hold it together because they were afraid they would run aground on the sandbars of Syrtis. They lowered the sea anchor and let the ship be driven along. ¹⁸We took such a violent battering from the storm that the next day they began to throw the cargo overboard. ¹⁹On the third day, they through the ship's tackle overboard with their own hands. ²⁰When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and the storm continued raging, we finally gave up all hope of being saved.

Wow, you feel like you are there.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I was getting a little seasick. Luke, who is a dramatic writer, clearly was along on this journey. This is a first-hand, eyewitness account. What details! My goodness, Dave, this anticipates the modern novel, this is so well written with such descriptions and nautical details and...

DAVE BAST

In fact, you can just see it. They are holding the ship together with ropes and tossing the cargo overboard...

SCOTT HOEZEE

All is clearly about lost except that in the middle of it all, there is this man named Paul, who we know is the central player at this part of God's story of the Church. So, an angel comes to Paul and says: Everybody is going to make it. The ship might not make it; in fact, it is not going to; but you have to go see Caesar. So, tell everybody you are going to make it. So, there is some good news in the midst of the storm. So, he basically tells everybody: Look, stay with the ship. It will go down, but I have a word from my God; you are going to be okay.

Picking it up at verse 33, something very interesting happens:

Just before dawn, Paul urged them all to eat. "For the last fourteen days," he said, "you have been in constant suspense and have gone without food. You have not eaten anything. ³⁴Now I urge you to take some food. You need it to survive. Not one of you will lose a single hair from his head." ³⁵After he said this, he took some bread and gave thanks to God in front of them all; and then he broke it and began to eat. ³⁶They were all encouraged, and ate some food themselves. ³⁷There were two hundred and seventy-six onboard.

What I think is so interesting about that is, in the Gospels in general in the New Testament, but certainly in Luke, there is never any missing it. If somebody takes bread: Takes, thanks, breaks, gives. It is always a sign that somehow the Lord's Supper is at work here, and it seems like there is something sacramental here, that in the midst of the storm, there is this moment of grace that Paul is essentially holding a kind of Lord's

Supper at the Lord's command with these people who probably are not believers, which raises some interesting questions we can maybe talk about in a few minutes, and then we are told – I remember when I preached a sermon on this, I entitled it *All Encouraged*, because we are told that after they take the bread that Paul gave them, they were all encouraged. Well, if it really was the presence of Jesus in that meal, you can understand why.

DAVE BAST

Yes; the story reaches its climax at the end of the chapter when daylight comes and they can hear the sound of surf pounding on a distant shore, so they figure their best chance is to run aground and get to this island – whatever it is – they do not know where they are. It has been two weeks that they have been running blind, so they cut away the sea anchor and they try to make it to the shore, but they get stuck on a sandbar and the ship begins to be broken apart by the pounding of the surf. Then we read the conclusion to the story:

⁴²The soldiers planned to kill the prisoners to prevent any of them from swimming away and escaping. So, even at the last moment, Paul, who has just said: We are all going to be saved; do not worry; God has assured me of this; just trust in him and follow my lead; but the soldiers are going to kill them, ⁴³and the centurion, wanting to spare Paul's life, kept them from carrying out their plan. He ordered those who could swim to jump overboard first and get to land. ⁴⁴The rest were to get there on planks or on other pieces of the ship. In this way, everyone reached land safely.

So, there it is; drama. Let's talk a little bit next about what that might suggest to us as Christians, and what kind of lessons we see in this dramatic story.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are wrapping up today a seven-part series on the book of Acts, Dave, which we have been doing for a while, and it brings us right to the end of the book. We just got to the end of Chapter 27 with this dramatically described shipwreck. People floating ashore on pieces of wood from the ship that has been battered beyond recognition, and they all end up on an island called Malta eventually; and from there eventually Paul is going to actually make it to Rome finally, which was the goal all along; and all of this whole story ultimately raises some questions about what we often call the providence of God, and what is going on, and how is God working? So, things ultimately work out, but what a path to get there!

DAVE BAST

Yes, right. You know, one of the parts that we skipped for the sake of time when we read this story was what Paul said first to his shipmates when he urged them not to lose hope, or to keep up their courage, and so we read in verse 22 that he says:

Not one of you will be lost; only the ship will be destroyed. ²³Last night an angel of the God whose I am and whom I serve, the God – that phrase – the God whose I am and whom I serve. (I belong to him and I am serving him.) He came to me, or sent an angel to me, who told me, “Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand trial before Caesar and God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you.”

So, there is the reassurance that – Paul, you are part of God's plan, and in and through all of the bad things that are happening to you, God has an overriding purpose that will be fulfilled. You must stand trial before Caesar; not just you will or you might if you get out of this tough spot, but, Paul, this is the plan that God has set before you.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And it begs the question, or forces the question, which so many of us have asked at one time or another in our lives, even when – and it usually is in retrospect – even when looking back, we look at some of the things that have happened in our lives – hard things: the loss of a job, the death of someone we loved, a relocation with our job that did not go well – we look back at the storms, if not the shipwrecks, of our lives; even if, in retrospect looking back we can say, “Yes, that was all part of God's plan.” There is still that natural human tendency, and maybe Paul asked it, too, for all we know, which is to say to God: What is with all the ups and downs of life, God? I know you have a plan, and I can often – sometimes, if we are blessed we can see in

retrospect what the plan was, even though it involved things we did not like or hated or suffered from – but it always has the question: Look, if you want to get Paul to Rome, there has to be an easier way than all of this; so, what is going on?

DAVE BAST

Yes; well, that is true, but you know, there is another truth that is equally prominent in scripture, and that is that there is an enemy – there is a power that is opposed to the plan of God, and the enemy is very active as well. We try to juggle these things: God's sovereignty, our own human choices, the work of the devil in the world, the satanic things that go on; and it all adds up to a great mystery.

I think it was N. T. Wright who points out in a message on Acts that when Paul announces in Chapter 19 that he wants to go to Rome, a verse that we read, it is as though Satan wants to keep him from going there; and so, all these bad things happen; and there are attacks that happen, but God's providence means that somehow in his overarching sovereignty, he is able to ultimately bring good from all those evil things. Not that we necessarily understand the purpose of every one; not that we get it all figured out; not that by and by we will know all about it and we will praise him for all the bumps along the way – well, maybe we will – but yes, there is prison and there is the threat to his life and there is shipwreck and we did not even read the beginning of Chapter 28, where he finally makes it to shore and a viper fastens itself on his hand and the locals think this must be a murderer because he escaped the sea, but now the snake is going to get him. Talk about snake bit!

SCOTT HOEZEE

Snakes on the plane; what else can go wrong? And I think that is absolutely right that we do not understand the mysteries of life: Why bad things happen; why difficult things happen; but, as you reminded us, Dave, there is always more going on, including, yes, the forces that oppose God.

Paul often wrote about – and it is this big mystery in theology and the great debate – but Paul would often write about the powers and principalities of this age. Paul had a sense of active opposition to the Church; and so, it is not as though we have think God whipped up this storm or God pre-arranged a ship wreck, or God threw the viper his way. This could be the devil just throwing everything in his toolkit and seeing what sticks. And yet, through it all – and that is why I loved, as we saw in the last segment, Dave, the suggestion – and probably not everybody agrees with this – or commentators – but when Paul, just before the ship goes down, says to the sailors, “You have to eat,” but then there is the familiar: Take, thank, break, give – and it looks like a little mini Lord's Supper in the middle of the storm – I love that image because it is something we all, in our lives, need to cling to. All of us are on the storm-tossed boat, as it were, at some point. All of us are at the hospital bed of a child, of a father, of a loved one, a spouse. All of us are in the midst of the storm at some point or another; some people to much greater intensity than others, but all of us eventually. What I love about that feeding on the ship is the image of the crucified and raised Jesus Christ riding it out with us; not undone by the storm; not abandoning us; the storm is not happening because he is not there or we are being punished; no. He is with us in the middle of it as the crucified savior making sure that we are going to make it ultimately because nothing can hinder us.

DAVE BAST

Yes, it is like Christ being with the disciples on the Sea of Galilee in the boat, right, during the storm; sleeping peacefully as they are panicky. This is terrifying. Paul is scared; I am sure Luke is scared; even writing about it, but not only is the Lord there with them and reassuring them, but he is also reassuring them that their life's purpose will be fulfilled and that Paul will appear before Caesar and bear witness to the Gospel there.

I think we can also share that same conviction whatever befalls us; whatever happens to us. Those two things: God is with us and God's purpose for our life will be ultimately fulfilled even in the bad things.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And finally, as the book of Acts now comes in for a landing, Paul finally gets to where he so long wanted to be: Rome. We will look at how this book wraps up in just a moment.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, and we are wrapping up now this brief series on Acts, and we have come, finally, to the end of the book of Acts; and just read the exciting chapter, or most of it, of Paul's sea journey to Rome that ended in shipwreck on the island of Malta, but yet all the passengers were saved by the power and under the providence of God. Then eventually – actually, they have to spend a few months there, through the winter, until it is safe to sail again – and finally, Paul and his immediate companions arrive in Rome and they are met outside the city by a delegation of Christians. They are brought into the city and, actually, Paul manages to find himself a place to live. We have an understanding, many of us, that he was thrown into prison there and he languished in a dungeon. In fact, if you visit Rome, they will show you the dungeon that supposedly Paul was in. Maybe later, I do not know, at some other point, but this is not what the Bible is talking about. Paul is under house arrest and he is able to rent a house to live in, and yes, he is chained to the guards who rotate in and out, but he is actually fairly well off, fairly comfortable, and he spends his days preaching and teaching to people who come to see him.

SCOTT HOEZEE

He is like a magnet, and people are just coming to him like they are iron filings in the place he is staying. He becomes a famous prisoner. It sort of reminds me – and it may not have been from here – that he wrote the letter to the Philippians, but I love the opening chapter of Philippians, where Paul says: Everybody knows I am here for Jesus, and it is making me a bit of a buzz; a bit of a celebrity figure, and other people are preaching Jesus even more than before. I am just so happy. He even admits that some people are trying to out-preach Paul or whatever; so he says: Not everybody's motives are true, but you know what? If they are talking about Jesus, I am just the happiest person in the world. I will rejoice. So, you have this picture of people just streaming to Paul because they just have to find out who is this guy and what does he have to say?

DAVE BAST

Well, and both Jews and non-Jews are coming; both Jews and Gentiles; both Christians and non-believers, and he is just entertaining everybody; and you can imagine what an ear full those guards must have gotten. So, Paul also says in Philippians: Even the Praetorian Guard of Caesar's household has heard the Gospel because, no doubt, these soldiers are carrying back what they have been hearing. One other little point from Philippians that we learned, probably about this period of Paul's life, most likely, is that the way he was able to live is because they sent money to him...

SCOTT HOEZEE

That's right.

DAVE BAST

And so, he is being supported by the gifts of that wonderful church in Philippi, and no doubt, others as well. It is a great picture of – you know, at one point Paul had said: I did not take any money from you. I earned my own living. But now, he is not able to do that. He cannot make tents anymore, so...

SCOTT HOEZEE

I'll take it.

DAVE BAST

Right, exactly; and the church supports this Gospel ministry of Paul. It is kind of a missionary support.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Let me read, actually, and then we will spend a few minutes reflecting on it in closing. Let me read the very end of Acts; this is from Acts 28, and I will pick it up at verse 23 and I will read it through to the end. ²³They arranged to meet Paul (all the people coming on a certain day) and came in even larger numbers to the place where he was staying. He witnessed to them from morning till evening, explaining about the

kingdom of God and from the Law of Moses, and from the prophets, and he tried to persuade them about Jesus. ²⁴Some were convinced by what he said, but others would not believe. ²⁵They disagreed among themselves, and began to leave after Paul had made this final statement, “The Holy Spirit spoke the truth to your ancestors when he said through Isaiah the prophet, ²⁶‘Go to this people and say, ‘You will be ever hearing, but never understanding; you will be ever seeing, but never perceiving; ²⁷For this peoples’ heart has become callous; they hardly hear with their ears and they have closed their eyes; otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn, and I would heal them.’ ²⁸Therefore, I want you to know that God’s salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen.” ^{30b} For two whole years, Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. ³¹He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance. And that is the end of Acts.

DAVE BAST

That is the end of Acts, and you know, my initial reaction to that is: Huh? What do you mean, Luke? That is the end?

SCOTT HOEZEE

When did he die? What happened next?

DAVE BAST

Exactly! You leave us hanging? This is like a cliffhanger with no sequel. No nice conclusion. This is like a detective show where they do not solve the murder. You want to know what became of Paul, and Luke does not tell us. He just leaves him there, preaching and teaching to people who will listen. Some are rejecting it; a lot of the Jews now have turned against it, and Paul says Isaiah prophesied about that: You are hearing, but you are not really getting it, but the Gentiles are going to increasingly respond; and so, he is just there, teaching and preaching about the kingdom of God and the Lord Jesus; which is not, in my mind, two different subjects, but one and the same, because the Lord Jesus is the king.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I think this was strategic. Luke is one of the best writers that we have in the Bible; all those wonderful stories in Luke, and we just saw his narrative powers on display in the report of the ship wreck. He clearly ended the Gospel strategically this way. Sure, he could have gone on and said: Oh, and here is how Paul died, and that would have been a sad... but instead, he wanted the last words... the way you put it just now, I mean, the translation we just read said: He proclaimed the kingdom, or preached the kingdom, and taught. But actually, in the Greek the verbs are the ongoing sense – preaching and teaching – ongoing actions – he was preaching and teaching.

DAVE BAST

He kept on preaching and kept on teaching.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; and the version I just read got it right. Some turn it around, but the last Greek word is the word *hindrance*, but it is *no hindrance*; the Gospel, the teaching, is going on and on and...

DAVE BAST

Unhindered.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Nothing can stop it. That is where Luke wants to end. He wants to end on that positive note: there is no stopping this Gospel.

DAVE BAST

Exactly, because Paul is not the hero; Peter is not the hero; the Gospel is the hero of the story; the Holy Spirit is the main actor, and the story goes on. Ministers come and go, but the message goes on unhindered throughout the world.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Amen.

DAVE BAST

Well, thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation. I am Dave Bast with Scott Hoezee, and we would like to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into scripture. Come to groundworkonline.com, our website, and let us know what topics or passages you would like us to address on *Groundwork*.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/the-unchained-gospel>

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