

## Mission Possible

### “Finishing the Race!”

Acts 21-25

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As we land our plane on the Book of Acts, we're covering Acts, chapters 21 through 28. We ended on chapter twenty last week as Paul had a singular goal in mind, which was to get to Rome, because he knew God had directed him to preach the gospel to the power center of Rome. But in order to get there, he had to do what Jesus did - he had to go to Jerusalem - and he had to get in trouble. And so he went to Jerusalem, and continued to preach everywhere he went. He knew that when he got back to Jerusalem, it was not going to be met with applause from the Pharisees and religious rulers, and that's exactly what happened. They put him on trial and at one point they would have let him go, but he said, *"No, I appeal to Caesar."* which was a legitimate legal move to appeal to a higher court.

So they put him on a ship to cross the Mediterranean Sea. But, they had a little problem - a massive storm arose, and the ship began to be get beat up in the sea and and the guys on the ship began to wonder what was going on. *"Have we angered the gods?"* Paul piped up and said, *"Well, it's probably because of me."* and they were thinking about throwing him overboard but he said, *"Listen, God has told me that we will be okay."* The ship ran aground and began to break apart but they were actually able to make it onto the island of Malta. And when they got on the beach, something really wild happened.

They didn't know what to think of Paul. They were *scared* of him and they were scared of his God. They didn't know what to make of what happened - while Paul was helping gather some wood, he got bit by a poisonous snake, and the superstitious sailors believed that if someone got bit by a snake and died, then it was because they had angered the gods. So, Paul got bit by a snake that came out from under the wood. It latched onto his arm but nothing happened to him. The sailors were freaking out thinking he was going to die because he was evil and had done something wrong. But, as it turned out, nothing happened to him. He was fine - he literally just shook it off and was completely fine.

Paul finally got to Rome after a long and arduous trip. After the first three missionary journeys that he went on planting churches, this fourth and last journey was from Jerusalem all the way to Rome to preach the gospel to Caesar - the king and emperor there. That ended a fourteen-year period which we have covered in the last few months where many churches were planted that would begin to rock the world and turn it upside down with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Once in Rome, Paul began to talk to the leaders there who were actually interested in what he had to say, and they began meeting with him. They wanted to know more about what he was talking about. And so, for two years Paul was actually allowed to live in his own place. He was kept under minimum guard and he had a lot of freedom so that crowds began to come and assemble in his house, and he preached the gospel to them for two years. Not only was he preaching to the crowds, he was preaching to the governors there because they were very interested to know about Jesus and the kingdom that he was talking about.

The only people that didn't like it were the Jews. They were still resistant. But, we must remember something, because it's easy to blame the Jewish people. They didn't believe in Jesus and they rejected him, but Scripture says that their eyes were *blinded* until the fullness of the Gentiles was to come in. We need to understand that if the Jews had not turned their back on Jesus, which was under their power to do, we would not have been brought into the kingdom of God. They *had* to reject Jesus.

So this idea of blaming Jewish people for what happened in Jesus' time is the same thing as someone blaming *us* for slavery when we weren't even alive at that time. We had nothing to do with that - we weren't even *there*. We need to understand that the Jerusalem of today - the Jewish people - they weren't alive two thousand years ago. And this attitude and mentality - this dark racism - against the Jewish people is demonic in nature. I don't care who that offends. If you are coming against Israel, you need to read your Bible and understand that God *loves* the Jewish people. His heart in Romans 10:11 is for the Jews to come to repentance and come into the kingdom because of Jesus Christ.

They'll have to come just like you and I do, by accepting Jesus Christ as Savior and as Lord of their lives and by letting his sacrifice cover their sins. They'll have to do the same thing. Many Jews in this hour and day are coming to Christ, and we need to *pray* for them that they will *continue* to come to Christ. We need to turn off the influencers, news feeds, and the different voices that say Israel and the Jewish people are evil. The enemy wants to berate and decimate the very ones who are the object of God's love. We must not buy into the cultural attitude that Jewish people are evil or that they're trying to rule the world. We need to let that go and *pray for* Israel, not *against* them. And shouldn't we be praying for the other side of the political aisle as well? - praying for them, *not* against them? Absolutely!

As we finish going through the book of Acts, we're ending with three big-idea themes. This is a 30,000-foot view as we recall some things we've learned, and then we're going to come down to where we live. So, don't ignore the 30,000-foot fly-over because it's important and it feeds into who we are right now.

The first of the big-idea themes in the book of Acts is the *Holy Spirit* who empowers the Church. Back in Acts chapter 1, Jesus said, *"Not many days from now, the Holy Spirit is going to come upon you."* We saw that happen as the day of Pentecost rolled around and the Holy Spirit was poured out. Acts 2:1-4 says, *"When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly, a sound like a blowing of a mighty of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and begin to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them."*

That was the Church's *birthday*. The churches, or what we call the *Ekklesia*, which is the word *assembly* or *gathering*, is actually not a Christian term. It became *used* as a Christian term but it was actually a *cultural* term. Any group or assembly was called the *ekklesia*. Paul later talks about the Ekklesia as being the Church. This a gathering or assembly of people who are coming together under the banner of the name of Jesus Christ. That all happened here in the book of Acts.

The second big idea was that the early church-community was birthed and then developed as it began to grow and flourish. Acts 2:42-44 says that after the Holy Spirit fell on them at Pentecost, this "power" happened - this *empowerment* - this all-of-a-sudden-they-had-something-they-didn't-have-before. Not a "thing" - a *"Who."* They had Someone they didn't have before. They had the person of the Holy Spirit come upon them to go and preach the gospel, and to be anointed to share the gospel all over the world, and that's exactly what happened.

Acts 2:42 NIV - The Fellowship of the Believers

*"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common."*

These were all the people who had come together after they had received the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. Talk about force-multiplier - now there was a *force* - an army being raised up for the kingdom of God. They devoted themselves to teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer. Has that formula changed? *No*, this is what we do when we come together. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles, and all the believers were together and had everything in common.

The third big idea: the gospel spreads to all nations. The great commission says “to go therefore and make disciples of all nations.” In the original language it literally means “as you are going, disciple the nations.” It's a little different connotation. It's not just “get a passport and a Bible and go touch the world.” That's good, and we should do that, but it also means, “*as you are going in your everyday life, everywhere you live, everywhere you work, everywhere you play, you are to be making disciples.*” Interestingly enough, we live where the nations have come to us. The nations are here. And as we go, we have the opportunity to disciple nations right here in our own backyard.

Not everybody on Main Street speaks just like us. People we meet on any given weekend have come to our town from all over the world, and that's *amazing*. The nations have come to *Fredericksburg*. What should we be doing as we are going? We should be discipling the nations - living our life out loud. Living our faith out loud.

Acts 1:8 - NIV - Empowered to be Salt and Light

*“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”*

“*Jerusalem*” - that's right where they were. “*In all Judea*” - that's a surrounding area, and then “*Samaria and to the ends of the earth.*” He says in these concentric circles, we're going to go out, take the gospel - share the gospel, and be witnesses of Jesus.

These are my take-aways from our study through the book of Acts: The first one is, *just be a good Christian*. That begs the question, “*Well, what's a Christian?*” God *does* expect us to grow as disciples. We're to grow up into all things into Christ. The scripture talks about how God expects us to grow up, but with what we *already* know, and without learning another thing, we're responsible for what we know now. The idea of just being a good Christian means to do what we know to do. Sometimes we have this idea that when we get to this point in our walk with God, we'll suddenly blossom and have this epiphany and everything will go well and work like it's supposed to.

Or, when we know *more*, then we'll lead a small group - when we know more, then we'll start showing up on Wednesday nights and going to the “Walking with Jesus” discipleship classes - when we know more... and it's always a “*when I*” and “*if I*,” and we tend to never really *get* there because it's like a carrot that's always just out of reach. We always think that when we do this, then it'll be the right time. Couples think, “*Well, when it's the right time, then we'll have a child,*” and then they grow old and never have one because it was *never* the right time. Is it ever the right time? We have these misnomers about life that someday when we *feel* a certain way then we'll step out. But God's called us to be doers of the word and not *hearers* only.

That means we are to *act* now on what we know now - that is indeed what we're responsible for even now. It shouldn't discourage us to think that if we *learn* more, we'll be *responsible* for more. No, you'll be ready to carry that suitcase when you *get* there. When it's time for us to learn and grow and understand more, we will be able to carry that suitcase in our faith. So, just be a good Christian. How do we do that? Well, first of all, we have to receive the good news. We have to start.

It's amazing how many people attend churches and they've never actually taken the first step of saying, *"Yes, Jesus Christ, I accept you as my Savior. You're the Lord of my life. I give my heart to you. I receive you into my life, and I want to be born again like the scripture describes. And I want to live my life pleasing You. I want to live my life knowing You. I want to grow in my faith and my understanding of the Bible."* That's your first step in.

It's amazing how many people sit in churches for decades and never make that decision. They've sat through services. They've heard sermons. They've sang worship. They've taught a Sunday school class, but they never actually stepped over the line to say, *"I'm going all in with Jesus Christ. I'm going to say yes to Jesus."* We should never assume that everybody in the room has said Yes. A lot of people say, *"Someday" or "Maybe"*. After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee proclaiming the good news of God. We call that the gospel. Jesus said that the time has come. He said the kingdom of God has come near, and then he said, *"Repent and believe the good news."* That's what we do. We repent. But the idea is we turn not just away from sin - we turn to Jesus.

That's repentant - we turn to him and we say, *"Yes, I believe the good news that Jesus Christ came and gave his life for me. That he was crucified for me and three days later he rose from the dead. He lived the life I should have lived and he died the death I should have died and he did it in my place. Three days later, Jesus was raised from the dead, thereby proving that he's the Son of God."* Have you repented and believed the good news? Not just have you attended church, not just are you a good person, but are you truly authentically *born again*? That is the message of the book of Acts. It's to believe this. The gospel was preached over and over and over throughout the book of Acts.

Here's the second part of *just be a good Christian*: to grow and develop as a disciple of Jesus. This sounds obvious, but we all need to be reminded and then we need to re-read these things.

Colossians 2:6-7 ESV - Alive in Christ

*"Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving."*

By faith, right? By grace. Through faith. That's how we receive Jesus. But that's *also* how we walk in him. We don't get born again, give our life to Jesus by faith and by grace, and then turn off our faith. No - it's actually a continual walk of faith. We have to walk through that the same way. Scripture says this, *"As you receive Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him."* Being rooted - having deep roots. We all need to go through this again and again. There's too much information to get in one pass. *"Rooted and built up in him and established in the faith just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving."* He's talking about this growth - this development - as a disciple.

God expects us to grow. He expects us to know *more* than we knew before. He expects us to continue to walk out a deep theological word called sanctification. That means being *set apart*, but it's also the on-going growth and the on-going journey of our faith. The third part of what it means to just be a good Christian is this: Be a *carrier* of the gospel message of Jesus into every arena of life. That's not an option. The reason why the Lord drew us to himself to be born again is so that we would indeed be a carrier of that gospel message - the message of Jesus - into every arena of our life.

The point is for us to share the gospel - spread the message. Gen Z is going to come, catch up with us, and run right past us if we don't get it in gear. God is working in the next generation. He's raising up the most conservative generation we've seen in a long time. They are on fire for God. Revivals are breaking out in colleges all over America and we can't even imagine what the rest of this year is going to look like. Last year was wild with revival - imagine the *whole next* generation! We have the same responsibility - to share our faith with others. It sounds funny saying that in a church, but sometimes we need to be reminded that it is on us to share the gospel - the good news.

Tell people your gospel story. Give them your elevator pitch. It can be "the two-minute miracle" as we used to call it. How can you share your faith in two minutes of how you came to Christ? *"Here's what I was before. Here's what happened to me. And here's where I am now. I'm alive and growing. Now I can't ever look back."* So we do this where? Well, we do it where we *live*. We do it where we *work*. We do it where we *play*. And we do it in the *public square*. In other words, this is the engaging of our culture. You know, the idea of engaging culture isn't just getting somebody elected. Engaging culture is advancing the kingdom of God in our world. We need to understand that. That's the heart of what we're trying to do - engage our culture with the gospel of Jesus Christ in the public square!

Matthew 5:13-16 NIV - Salt and Light

*"You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot. You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven."*

This is who Jesus said we *are*, not who we're going to be. If we're a follower of Christ, we are *salty*. We *should* be salty - have a little *edge* to us - bring a little spice of life into the situation. And we're also the light of the world. We should shine so bright that people have to wear *shades* around us. We should walk into a room and just light it up. Why? Because we have the Light of Life in us. We all know people who walk in a room and they just light it up. Why is that? Well, it's not just their smile. It's something radiating out of their *person*. Who might that be? Jesus in us, that Light.

Here's the next part of just being a good Christian - Just do the next *right thing*. Think back over this last week. How many opportunities were put in front of us to just do the next right thing? I'm not talking about the next twenty things. I'm talking about the next thing. Who remembers this saying? "*How do you eat an elephant? - One bite at a time.*" Let's eat the elephant one bite at a time. And you know what that means? Just do the next *thing*. Just do the next right thing.

Psalms 119:105 ESV

*"Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path."*

All we need to do is walk one next step - do the next right thing. Imagine what we would be like if we took that into our work life tomorrow, into our home life around the kitchen table, and we simply did the next right thing - simply took the next step, not the next five - not the next *ten*. Let's just do the next right thing in every arena of our life. You know what that is? - that's being a good Christian. Sometimes we make being a Christian so esoteric and mysterious that we sometimes forget that being a good Christian is just doing the next right thing - just taking one step at a time. "*His word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.*" And then the last thing is, just do the next thing Jesus tells you. It's not complicated. We want to do what Jesus wants us to do.

James 1:22-25 NIV

*"Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it - nnot forgetting what they have heard, but doing it - they will be blessed in what they do."*

This is the heart of the book of Acts. Just be a good Christian - not just a *doer* - but a be-er, and to represent Jesus well in our spheres of influence. I'm so proud of this church. I look around this room, and am so thankful that we get to do this *together*. When we move on from the book of Acts and we start looking at other things, I hope that the principles that we've learned from there, as we read through it, that we all highlighted in our Bible as we've gone along, because there are some of the most formative, powerful scriptures found in the book of Acts. Don't act like, "*Oh, check the box - that's done.*" Revisit it often because we need to stay filled with the Holy Spirit.

## **Prayer**

*Father, in the name of Jesus, thank you for Your Word. Jesus, we say Yes to You. We pray that You would give us grace even as we step out of here to do the next right thing - to be a good Christian, and to take our faith out where we live, where we work, where we play, and to literally shine bright so that others will see, others will hear, and others will be able to come to Jesus just like we did. We want to be good Christians and we want to do the next thing You tell us to do. We commit to that in our hearts, in Jesus' name. Amen*