

## Acts | The Incendiary Fellowship

### Unchained | Freedom Rising from Confinement

#### *Unchained!*

Acts 28.15ff and 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy 2.8-9  
8.20.17

*And the brethren, when they heard about us, came from there as far as the Market of Appius and Three Inns to meet us; and when Paul saw them, he thanked God and took courage. <sup>16</sup> When we entered Rome, Paul was allowed to stay by himself, with the soldier who was guarding him. <sup>17</sup> After three days Paul called together those who were the leading men of the Jews, and when they came together, he began saying to them, "Brethren, though I had done nothing against our people or the customs of our fathers, yet I was delivered as a prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans. <sup>18</sup> "And when they had examined me, they were willing to release me because there was no ground for putting me to death. <sup>19</sup> "But when the Jews objected, I was forced to appeal to Caesar, not that I had any accusation against my nation. <sup>20</sup> "For this reason, therefore, I requested to see you and to speak with you, for I am wearing this chain for the sake of the hope of Israel." <sup>21</sup> They said to him, "We have neither received letters from Judea concerning you, nor have any of the brethren come here and reported or spoken anything bad about you. <sup>22</sup> "But we desire to hear from you what your views are; for concerning this sect, it is known to us that it is spoken against everywhere." <sup>23</sup> When they had set a day for Paul, they came to him at his lodging in large numbers; and he was explaining to them by solemnly testifying about the kingdom of God and trying to persuade them concerning Jesus, from both the Law of Moses and from the Prophets, from morning until evening. <sup>24</sup> Some were being persuaded by the things spoken, but others would not believe. <sup>25</sup> And when they did not agree with one another, they began leaving after Paul had spoken one parting word, "The Holy Spirit rightly spoke through Isaiah the prophet to your fathers, <sup>26</sup> saying, 'GO TO THIS PEOPLE AND SAY, "YOU WILL KEEP ON HEARING, BUT WILL NOT UNDERSTAND; AND YOU WILL KEEP ON SEEING, BUT WILL NOT PERCEIVE; <sup>27</sup> FOR THE HEART OF THIS PEOPLE HAS BECOME DULL, AND WITH THEIR EARS THEY SCARCELY HEAR, AND THEY HAVE CLOSED THEIR EYES; OTHERWISE THEY MIGHT SEE WITH THEIR EYES, AND HEAR WITH THEIR EARS, AND UNDERSTAND WITH THEIR HEART AND RETURN, AND I WOULD HEAL THEM.'"<sup>28</sup> "Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will also listen."*

<sup>30</sup> *And he stayed two full years in his own rented quarters and was welcoming all who came to him, <sup>31</sup> preaching the kingdom of God and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness, unhindered.*

**2 Timothy 2.8-10** *Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, descendant of David, according to my gospel, <sup>9</sup> for which I suffer hardship even to imprisonment as a criminal; but the word of God is not imprisoned.*

This is the final sermon in a series AND the FIRST sermon in a series (maybe the first time I've done that). The Book of Acts closes with Paul in prison (house-arrest) and noticing how Luke, the historian, ends the book ...especially the VERY last word...we can't miss the point: the main Character in this story is NOT caged...He's free and He still ACTS (NOT a tame lion).

So, we hope to look at the benefits that came out of Paul's imprisonment...especially the words that Paul penned from that two-year long house arrest, those writings usually called The Prison Letters - i.e.: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon. Our new series takes a section from each of those letters...Paul imprisoned – the Gospel unchained.

The Acts of the Apostles ends with the very deliberately chosen word – “UNCHAINED” or “unhindered”. And Paul picks up on this as he wrote (from a later imprisonment) a letter to a young pastor named Timothy when Paul wrote, “I suffer hardship even to imprisonment as a criminal; but the word of God is not imprisoned.” (2Tim 2.9)

Today we begin to look at the FREEDOM of God, that God is doing things in the world and in our lives and in the church... History is moving and God is the Mover. He's unfolding His plan, even when it looks like chaos and craziness and failure – in fact maybe especially when it looks like the sky is falling – THAT'S when God and His invisible Hand are moving things toward His wonderful purposes.

The 115<sup>th</sup> Psalm says, “Our God is in the heavens – He does whatever He wants!” (3) and today we look at the vivid truth that the absolute freedom of God is good news... even when sometimes it looks like God and His cause are failing.

Two points: 1) Proclamation and 2) Providence

First, PROCLAMATION – Paul is doing what he does and what he's been called to do which is to go to the ends of the earth proclaiming the story of what Jesus Christ accomplished in His life death and resurrection.

Paul was a Roman citizen and that was a big deal and came with a lot of benefits. It enabled him to appeal a court case that Paul knew was unfair and would NOT end with justice. He appeals to Caesar.

So when he finally arrives in Rome, while I'm sure he's happy to be there and he's been through a lot of super-difficult stuff just to GET there... but I can only imagine that he must be a little rattled. He would soon (turns out it'll take TWO years!) but eventually he would appear before the Great Nero and that must've been terrifying.

SO...when Paul's met by some Christians who'd traveled far just to greet him – I'm sure it was VERY encouraging to Paul and in fact it says, “when Paul saw the brethren, he thanked God and took courage” (literally: “he received courage” – transmitted).

And then they situate him in a rented space with the soldier guarding him and three days later Paul is BACK IN BUSINESS... On the third day when life comes out of death... Good News starts coming out of Paul's house arrest! He's proclaiming.

He invites some Jewish clergymen to his house/room for a discussion. He explains that he's IN Rome for a court appearance. His own countrymen, Jewish leaders from Jerusalem were going to execute him on charges of blasphemy but Paul appealed to Rome and NOW he's there (with the soldier who was not only ensuring Paul didn't escape but protecting him).

And Paul continues to say, "Look, brothers, I don't know what you've heard about me but I AM NOT IN ANY WAY ANTI-JEWISH...I'm as Jewish as they come! IN FACT, I'm in chains because I stand for the Messianic Hope – I'm proclaiming Israel's gift to the world – the Messiah! But I could NOT get a fair trial in Jerusalem...so I HAD to appeal to Caesar... IS THAT WHAT YOU GUYS HEARD ABOUT ME?"

And they say, "Uh... actually we haven't heard anything about you (and that would've been a big relief for Paul) but as long as you bring this up...we would really like to know your views on this sect, this cult of the Nazarenes... Would you tell us what you know?" And Paul says, "Sure! It's what I DO!"

So they set up a time...Paul can't go to them...so they come to him. And a whole crowd of Jewish leaders comes to Paul's house and he starts proclaiming. (23) "He was explaining to them by solemnly testifying about the kingdom of God and trying to persuade them concerning Jesus, from both the Law of Moses and from the Prophets, from morning until evening."

The end of this book (Luke Vol. 2) sounds a lot like the ending of Luke Vol. 1 – remember there was a Triumphal Entry (similar to Paul greeted by the brethren in Rome and enters that great city with a police escort). And then in Luke Part One, the risen Jesus Christ appears to those disciples on the Emmaus Road and Luke recorded, "Then beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures." (Luke 24.27).

And now Paul...who by continuing to trust in Jesus Christ has begun to resemble Jesus Christ... now Paul the proclaimer is solemnly testifying about the kingdom of God and trying to persuade them concerning Jesus, from both the Law of Moses and from the Prophets, from morning until evening."(23)

And that's when...what always happens when this message is proclaimed...it happens here too: some are persuaded from the Scriptures and some are not.

And right before they break up Paul issues a serious warning: God spoke by Isaiah the Prophet to YOUR fathers about how they heard but didn't listen...they looked but didn't see...they had

the information but didn't understand...and the reason THEY and YOU don't see is that you don't WANT TO SEE..." Matthew Henry's famous quote on this passage: "There are none so deaf as those that WILL not hear and none so blind as those that WILL not see."

Paul's saying, "It's not difficult... even very simple people can see it clearly in the Hebrew Bible – it's not that YOU PEOPLE don't have the intelligence or lack the information – you have a heart-problem ...your hearts/motives are dull...you've become accustomed to your own independence and you will not depend on God...your trust-muscles have atrophied because you see yourselves as good people who don't need rescue from God – don't need grace... you're addicted to independence."

And then Paul says, "Look! You people MUST know how the Kingdom of God works...right? That God came to our ancestor Abraham and made a promise to him and promised to give Abraham's people the knowledge of God and GOD PROMISED TO BLESS ALL THE NATIONS BY THE SEED OF ABRAHAM. Well, I'm proclaiming now – the Seed of Abraham has come, One of our people, Jesus Christ the Messiah, the Savior of Jews and Gentiles alike...but if you insist on your worthiness...I'll go to the Gentiles; they'll listen."

Paul's trying to shock these guys into believing, into seeing their need for grace... and maybe in time, some came to believe. Paul kept right on proclaiming – in fact, the book concludes with this note: "...for TWO FULL YEARS in his own rented quarters Paul was welcoming all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness, unhindered ...unchained." (30-31)

Let's draw a few conclusions from this: First, note the wide variety of words in this book for the act of proclaiming. In this short passage there are so many words like saying, explaining, testifying, persuading, preaching, teaching. And Acts uses so many other words for this essential Christian practice like to reason (dialogue), exhort, admonish, encourage... It all reminds us that the transfer of truth from one to another is THE essential Christian practice.

It happens in big public settings like this...and in small groups in people's homes... in class discussions, in one-on-one conversations. We take courage from one another. No wonder Paul would write from THIS very imprisonment "Let the word of Christ richly dwell among you." (Colossians 3.16)

And no wonder that WE are always buggin' you to get into an environment that's Gospel-Rich – small groups and classes and conversations, retreats, where the Good News of Jesus Christ and the Kingdom of God can be reinforced, massaged into your heart and absorbed in every way possible.

It's NOT simply the transfer of facts; it's the news of God's global program, that God came to Planet Earth and entered into sacred promise with Abraham and Abraham's people. And God

swore to send the Seed of Abraham...the promised Son...the Descendent of David who gives to failed and desperate people a new standing... a right-ness that is NOT achieved but RECEIVED. "Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, descendant of David, according to my gospel" (2Tim 2.8) wrote Paul to Timothy.

The good people to whom Paul issued this warning were unwilling to humbly receive grace from God because they preferred to depend on themselves. They were ok with getting more information but NOT ok with receiving grace...they didn't need it.

They wouldn't see the great plan of God to reclaim and renovate this fallen planet and to bring all things under the dominion of a New Adam, a perfectly benevolent King. But to hear that and to receive it every day...to make it your vision and help others "take courage" from it – that actually starts to change YOU and others too.

OK – here's the final point...much, much briefer (take courage!) and that is this very strong emphasis on God's MYSTERIOUS but GOOD governance of all things what we Christians call "Divine Providence".

Let me focus on those two words – mysterious and good. It's mysterious because it often looks circuitous or convoluted and we may even find ourselves thinking, "If I were God – I wouldn't do things that way!"

There are detours in life...there are things that take place that just don't seem to accomplish anything good at all... people get sick...relationships get severely strained...there are birth-defects and troubles and shipwrecks and snakebites... and we are sometimes left with nothing but questions and...faith.

Faith in what? Faith in the goodness of God and the ultimate goodness of His governance. Sometimes we look back and see that goodness (hindsight is 20/20) and sometimes future generations see the goodness of God's providence that we won't live to see (I think of Uriah the Hittite; 2 Sam 11-12).

Think of Paul's life...almost 5 wasted years. He was incarcerated unjustly in Caesarea for 2 years. Then, he wasted over 6 months traveling to Rome and the shipwreck on Malta (last week with the Barbarians!) and then another 2 years in Rome... all wasted.

This was a man with amazing gifts who was crazy-effective as a church planter and God just wasted, just squandered almost 5 years of Paul's life in the prime of Paul's effectiveness...

And YET...this is one of those times when we get to peer behind the curtain and see – "No! This was no waste of a life! This was the God who governs and preserves all things beautifully, truly and for good."

God embeds Paul in the “belly of the beast”- in the most influential city in the world. God choreographed riots, lying accusers, corrupt governments who put Paul in jail and just forgot about him. God arranged for weather patterns (a Mediterranean Super-storm!) and timing and the kindness of barbarians and a snake and a little group of Christians waiting to greet Paul in Rome... He arranged for guards to protect citizen Paul and allowed him an unlimited stream of visitors.

Paul had life in the Gospel...he was infected by the “life-virus” and he was highly, HIGHLY contagious. And God orchestrated all things to put Paul like an anti-Trojan-horse – he was allowed into Rome and he becomes like “patient-zero” just emanating this life virus to everyone who visited him.

Did Paul have help? Is that how he stayed welcoming even while under house arrest? Yeah! He had help – he took courage from other Christians... but mainly, Paul knew that God is Good because Paul believed his own message, “Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, descendant of David, according to my gospel, for which I suffer hardship even to imprisonment as a criminal; but the word of God is not imprisoned.”

Paul knew that while it’s often mysterious to our very limited vision and sometimes looks as if God were wasting His own resources, ultimately Paul saw that God’s wasting His own Son... by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ God defeated death (“Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead”). Paul knew that even when we can’t see it – God IS good and those who trust Him will find His providence, in the end, to unimaginably beautiful.

This is a message that’s alive...it’s untamed and powerful to inspire amazing courage (“take courage”) and satisfaction in those who trust.

I hope it works courage in YOU today as you think of this circuitous world and even your own present circumstances. You may be imprisoned or providentially hindered today – but the Gospel is unchained...