

Acts Series Part 68

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[0 : 00] We'll sing in Psalm 98 and verses 1 to 3. And sing Psalms, it's on page 129. Psalm 98, verses 1 to 3, we'll sing to the tune Paisley.

We'll sing a new song to the Lord, for wonders He has done, His right hand and His holy arm, the victory have won. Let's stand to sing verses 1 to 3 of this psalm.

We'll sing a new song to the Lord, for wonders He has done, His right hand and His holy arm, the victory have won.

That Lord, He cleared His saving word, and made it to be known.

To all the nations of the world, His right justice is sold.

[1 : 25] Except the slum and faithfulness, He has remembered fair.

Their covenant, He laid with them, the house of Israel.

And all the nations of the earth have seen what God has done.

Our God, who brings thee deliverance, are ye, is right and alone.

What's really important? Many of you, perhaps all of you, have heard of what happened yesterday in the match between Bolton and Tottenham, when the Bolton footballer, Fabrice Mwamba, collapsed in the middle of the game.

[2 : 49] And as far as I'm aware, remains in a critical condition in hospital. It was interesting to notice the reaction, particularly of the world of football, to this terrible incident.

One intriguing aspect, and I don't know how much significance should be afforded this, but it was intriguing, were the repeated references to prayer surrounding what had happened.

Among others, Wayne Rooney tweeted that he was praying for Mwamba. And there were a number of other players who were indicating and inviting and calling on others to pray for their fellow footballer.

Another reaction was captured by the headline in The Sun this morning. I should assure you that I did not buy The Sunday Sun, but I did discover by other means what one of the headlines in The Sun was this morning.

And it captured, I think, another reaction. When football no longer matters. I think, regardless of what our views might be on The Sunday Sun, we could echo that particular sentiment, when football no longer matters.

[4 : 11] It ties in with the question that we began with. What really matters? What's really important? And what's really important is a really important question, too often sidelined.

It's a good question to ask in different circumstances and contexts. It's a good question to ask if we're in a relationship. What is really important in the relationship that we have?

As we think of the families that we are part of, it's good to pause for a moment sometimes and ask the question, what's really important? We do this and we do that and so many things that maybe we're involved with.

But what's really important? We can ask the question, too, as we would analyze how we use our time, how we use our money.

We can ask the question also of what we do as a church. We can maybe do lots of things, but it's good sometimes to just pause and ask ourselves the question, what's really important?

[5 : 16] The final passage in Acts deliberately or otherwise addresses this question in the context of the work of the gospel.

What is really important? The reason I say that is that for many who have been following this book as we've been considering it, or indeed others who could pick up the book and read through it, I think for anybody in those circumstances, coming to the end of the book does leave us with the sense of there being a glaring omission.

The book seems to end without having told us about something very important. And really what I'm referring to is what happened to Paul? We're told that he arrives in Rome.

We're told of him preaching to the Jews. We're told of these two years under house arrest, or whatever the technical term would be for his situation. But of course we know that he had made his way to Rome for a particular purpose, and that was to face trial before Caesar.

He had appealed to Caesar, and to Caesar he would go. And yet we hear nothing of this appearance before Caesar, and of course nothing of any outcome of that appearance.

[6 : 42] Luke has, if the language isn't unfair, Luke has subjected us to fairly detailed accounts of trials before smaller fry, but what about the big one?

What about Caesar? Now one possible reason for the omission is that the trial had not taken place at the time of writing, though that would require an unlikely, though not impossible, early date for the composition of Acts.

Perhaps the issue is this matter of what's really important. And what really matters is not the fate of Paul, but the proclamation of the gospel.

What's really important is not what happens to the messenger, but the announcement of the message. And it is on this note that Luke chooses to end his account.

Notice the final words of the book of Acts. Boldly and without hindrance, he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ.

[7 : 49] It's as if Luke is saying, look, reader, this is what really matters. Even a great apostle like Paul, you may wonder, well, what became of him?

Or what became of this appearance before Caesar and what was the outcome? But it's not that these things are unimportant, but what really matters is that the gospel message is announced, is proclaimed that men and women are able to hear this message of the kingdom of God and about the Lord Jesus Christ.

That is what is really important. And of course, it's no less so today than it was at the time of Luke writing this book. So, let's end our own journey through Acts by considering this matter, the announcement of the gospel message by Paul in Rome to the Jews.

Now, to give us a little bit of the background, just very fleetingly, Paul arrives in Rome having been met and received by the Christian community in the city.

The reference is made to that in verses 14 and 15 that we didn't read this evening, but we can just notice it now quickly. There we found some brothers who invited us to spend a week with them, and so we came to Rome.

[9 : 10] The brothers there, the believers in Rome, had heard that we were coming, and they traveled as far as the forum of Appius and the three taverns to meet us.

At the sight of these men, Paul thanked God and was encouraged. So, Paul is met by the Christians in Rome, but then in what remains of the book, admittedly a very brief final part to the book, but in what remains, Luke makes no further reference to the Christian community, but rather relates Paul's attempts, none too successful it has to be said, to evangelize the Jews in Rome.

That Paul would have been concerned on his very arrival in Rome to have sought the opportunity to preach to the Jews doesn't, of course, surprise us. That was simply Paul following his usual pattern, grounded in that guiding principle to the Jew first.

Now, in Rome, for obvious reasons of his lack of liberty, he could not go to the synagogues, but he could invite the Jewish leaders to his own accommodation.

And this, of course, is what happens. This is what we are told is what transpires. And as we consider the message that Paul brings to these gathered Jews, largely, we are told, the leaders of the Jewish community. As we consider the message that he brings, we want to do so in the following way. We want to notice the manner of his delivery. I think there are lessons for us in the manner in which Paul delivers his message. But we also want to, of course, consider the content of his message. What is the message that he brings to the Jews in Rome? And then, much more briefly, notice the response of his audience, and then the conclusion of the matter, we might call it, or describe it in that way. So, if we begin by thinking about the manner of his delivery.

[11 : 23] One of the catchphrases of Frank Carson, the Irish comedian who died a couple of weeks ago, some of you may have picked up in the news, news of his death. And obviously, we were reminded of some of his catchphrases. And of course, perhaps the most memorable catchphrase of Frank Carson, regardless of whether you were a fan of the content of his comedy, but the catchphrase that is most remembered was, it's the way you tell him. So, it's not just about the content of the joke, but it's the way you tell him. Now, trivial, though the illustration is, it does make the point that the manner of delivery is important. You might say it's not the most important thing, but it is very important. And we've noticed this, of course, on more than one occasion as we've been going through the book of Acts. Paul is very concerned about the manner in which he gets across the message that he has, though the message, of course, is the fundamental matter. What can we say about Paul and the manner of his delivery as we are given some clues or some indications in this passage? Well, the first thing that I think we can say, and really we will be focusing our attention on what we read there in verse 23, they arranged to meet Paul on a certain day and came in even larger numbers to the place where he was staying. And then we read, from morning till evening, he explained and declared to them the kingdom of God and tried to convince them about Jesus from the law of Moses and from the prophets. Nearly all of what we've got to say revolves around what we find in that verse, though we will make reference to one other verse as well. The first thing that we can notice concerning the manner of his delivery is that Paul reasoned with them. His delivery was a reasoned delivery. Then in verse 23 we have the verb explained. From morning till evening he explained to his audience. Very clearly the manner in which he is getting across his message is in a reasoned manner explaining what he has to say. Paul knew and had great confidence in the absolute truthfulness of his message. There was no doubt in Paul's mind that what he had to say was true, was absolutely true.

And yet that confidence in his message did not serve as an excuse for limiting himself to dogmatic assertion. You know, Paul doesn't say, well, I know this is true, so all I need to do is just say it.

And well, it's up to them whether they understand, whether they believe, or whether they reject it. I know this is the message, this is the truth, and I'm going to declare it, and that is me fulfilling my responsibility. No, he reasons with them. He explains to them the content of his message. He knew very well that those who had gathered were not persuaded, certainly not yet persuaded, and that he had to reason with them, to convince them, to bring them to that point of being able to, with him, share the conviction concerning the truth of the message. Now, this undoubtedly would have involved, especially given what we're told, that from morning to evening he was engaged in this exercise. We can be very sure that it would have involved dialogue. It would have involved questions and answers, as Paul took them to consider messianic passages in the Old Testament, as we'll see in a moment. And no doubt those who gathered would have had questions. There would have been occasions where they very much disagreed with the point he was making, and they wouldn't have been slow to make known their disagreement, and Paul would have sought to satisfy them and to answer them, and there would have been this dialogue, this debate between Paul and those who gathered. No doubt a lively and robust debate ensued throughout the day. The point really is this, that Paul's delivery was a reasoned delivery. But we can also say, and this in a sense is important to say immediately to, you might say, balance what we're saying, certainly to complete in a measure what we're saying, is that his delivery was a personal. I say that for the following reason. There in verse 23 we're told that from morning till evening he explained and declared to them the kingdom of God.

The word there translated declared is a word that has at its root the idea of witnessing. Indeed, many of the Bible versions do choose to use the word witness or to witness earnestly.

And this idea of the word that Paul declared or witness to his audience, it seems to me, does introduce this aspect of personal testimony, of the preacher declaring what he has seen and what he has experienced. Yes, his delivery is reasoned. It's intellectually, if you wish, credible and robust.

[16 : 45] But it is not academic. And it's certainly not second hand. This is not simply something that he's heard from others and he's transmitting. No, this involves his own experience. He is witnessing to the truth that he has seen and that he has experienced. We know, of course, that Paul often did that. Indeed, in Acts we've seen on how, on a number of occasions, he makes specific reference to his own conversion, how he met with the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus, and how this formed a very important part of his presentation. This is very personal. It's not simply an academic presentation. So, it's reasoned, it's personal. But we can also say that the manner of his delivery was characterized by confidence.

For this we do go to the final verse. Now, I'm very aware that in the final verse it is speaking of an occasion subsequent to him speaking to the Jews. But I'm sure what is said in verse 31 of Paul would have been true of Paul as he spoke to the Jews. And in verse 31 we're told that his delivery was bold.

Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God. Now, this word boldly, I think, carries two connected meanings. Both of them important to notice. First of all, boldly carries the idea of courageous.

In the face of potential danger or opposition, Paul does not remain silent. So, there's that sense of courage. But I think more importantly, on this occasion the idea is more of the idea of the confidence that he enjoys in the message. So, when Luke says that he preached boldly, what he's saying is that Paul preached with great confidence in the message, in the truthfulness of the message, but also in the power of the message. Paul preached in a manner where he expected the message to have an impact. He expected the message to be that two-edged sword piercing into people's very inner condition. This was a confident declaration of the truth. Of course, this is very important for us too. We're not simply talking about preaching in a pulpit, but in whatever occasion or whatever opportunity we have to speak of Jesus, to speak about Jesus, to use the language of this chapter, that we would do so certainly, respectfully and humbly and winsomely, but do so also confidently. That these are things that we believe to be true. That this is a message that we believe to have great power to transform lives and families and communities. A confident declaration of the truth. I've maybe told you this story before, and if I have, you will bear with me. But I was told on one occasion of an actor who attended a church service, and apparently the preacher was able to preach a sermon that was very orthodox, very correct.

Nobody could pick him up on what he said. It was all very grounded in the scriptures, and the content was beyond reproach. But there appeared to be no real confidence or passion or heart in the manner of delivery. Now, we know that here there are matters of character and personality, and we're not denying that.

[20 : 32] But the point of the story is simply this, that rightly or wrongly, the actor at the end approached the preacher, and he said these words rather, what shall we say, rather harshly perhaps, I don't know.

But he said to him this, he said, I'm an actor, and I present lies as if they were the truth. You present the truth as if they were lies. Now, I feel sorry for the poor preacher who maybe was doing the best he could, but it illustrates, I think, in a measure at this point that it is important in declaring the truth that we declare it as the truth, that we ourselves are indeed persuaded, and that we have, as Paul had, boldness in declaring the truth. We can say a couple of other things also, just to draw things to a close regarding the manner of his delivery. Notice also that he was, I think we can take this by implication, very thorough in his delivery. In verse 23 we're told that he debated with them, he declared to them, he explained to them from morning until evening, ensuring that everything that it needed to be said was said. Paul was nothing if not thorough. So, if anybody's looking at their watch at seven o'clock and thinking, come on, time to draw things to a close, you should be grateful that we're not doing it from morning until evening. And the final thing that I just want to notice here in terms of Paul's delivery is that it was purposeful. Now, here I'm really drawing on what is said in verse 23 there towards the end where it says, from morning till evening, he explained and declared to them the kingdom of God, and then it says, and tried to convince them about Jesus, and tried to convince them.

Now, as we've already noted, and we'll be commenting on again in a moment, he was largely unsuccessful in trying to convince them. But the point is that Paul had a very definite goal or purpose in mind.

He was intent on convincing his audience. Again, for Paul, it was not simply a case of, well, take it or leave it. You know, this is the message, this is the truth. My job is to tell you, if you believe or if you don't believe, well, that's your problem. I fulfilled my duty. This is what it's about. Do with this as you please. No, for Paul, there was this very clear goal, and he delivered his message with that purposeful intent. He tried to convince them.

He was unsuccessful, largely on this occasion, but his goal and his purpose is clear. And again, I think there, without needing to labor the point, there is a lesson for us.

[23 : 27] But if we move on to the content of his message, the content of his message in verse 20, there is a reference that Paul makes as he is beginning his dialogue with the Jews that he is in chains because of the hope of Israel. So, clearly, the hope of Israel has something to do with the message that he brings. But more specifically, we're told in verse 23 again, we're told that his message was the kingdom of God, and it was about Jesus from the law of Moses and from the prophets.

And as we think of the content of the message, there's three elements that we want to notice. First of all, that Paul begins where they are. That is where his audience are. He begins there. But then we're going to notice that it's centered on Jesus and also grounded in the Bible. First of all, the content of his message begins where they are. What self-respecting Jews, certainly a pious or religious Jew, would not want to hear of the hope of Israel, a phrase that would bring to mind for all the promised Messiah and for some, the Pharisees, the hope of resurrection. And of course, the hope of Israel is connected to this theme of the kingdom of God. And here again, the messianic hope looms large.

God's promised Messiah who would come and restore the Davidic kingdom, a kingdom that they were persuaded or certainly hopeful would challenge and overcome even the might of Rome. And so to speak of the hope of Israel, to speak of the kingdom of God, these are themes that would have resonated with his audience. They are interested in these things. Some perhaps are gripped by the subject matter, others no doubt skeptical. But the point is, these are themes that they were familiar with and interested in. They want to hear what Paul has to say concerning the hope of Israel. They want to hear what he has to say concerning the identity of the Messiah. Though no doubt some of them already had an idea of what he was going to say, given the Christian presence that there already was in Rome and that they would have been certainly in a measure familiar with. The point is this, that we too must have a sense of who we are speaking to and what bridges exist that will allow us to connect and secure people's attention.

We maybe think that we live in a day when there are very few of these bridges. You could say, well, Paul, yes, he's speaking to Jews. He's got the whole of the Old Testament that they're interested in. That's much more than we've got when we are approaching folks today. But I wonder, is it not the case that if we think carefully, are there not in fact plenty of bridges that we can cross as we would seek to connect with people? Even the question with which we began this evening, what is really important? Is this not a question that many people, people who aren't religious in any way, people who have very little knowledge or interest in the Christian gospel, is that not a question that many people ask? As we were noticing, even the incident yesterday of this young footballer who collapses so dramatically and the reaction of it. People saying, well, what's really important?

Is that not something that we can build on as we would seek to enter into conversation and dialogue? So many bridges that there are, if we would but seek them out. But more, not more importantly, but moving to the central element, the content of his message is centered on Jesus. We're told that, that he spoke to them, he declared to them, he explained to them the kingdom of God, and he tried to convince them about Jesus. He doesn't start with Jesus, but his message is centered on Jesus.

[27 : 36] It's important to stress that Paul doesn't have two topics. He doesn't spend the morning speaking about the kingdom of God, and then say, well, right, we've done the kingdom of God, now we're going to move on and we're going to speak about Jesus. No, these things are intertwined. To speak of the kingdom of God, something that would have resonated with his audience, provides him the opportunity, the entree to his central concern, to tell them about Jesus. For Jesus is the promised Messiah, Jesus is God's promised King. Jesus is the one whose claims to be the Messiah were confirmed and vindicated by the resurrection. And so his message is centered on Jesus. Throughout the day, Paul would have presented to them the truth concerning Jesus, his identity, who he was, his coming, his life and teaching, his atoning death in the place of sinners, his resurrection from the grave, his ascension, his place at the right hand of the Father, the coming of his Spirit at Pentecost, his mission through his body, the church. All of these themes, I'm sure, would have been addressed by Paul as he tells them about Jesus. Jesus is the heart of his message, whatever the audience. How he gets to Jesus may vary depending on the audience, but the destination is always the same. Jesus Christ and

Him crucified. And so it must be with us. And as Jesus is for us such a wonderful subject, as a subject matter, if we can speak of Him as a subject matter, to have Him at the center of our message should certainly be no hardship. Centered on Jesus. He begins where they are, it's centered on Jesus, but finally concerning the content, it's grounded in the Bible. We're told that He spoke to them about Jesus from the Law of Moses and from the prophets. And the language used here by Luke is reminiscent of the language that we're familiar with, of Jesus on the road to Emmaus with the disciples there. What is it we read there in the 24th chapter of Luke? Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter His glory? And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, He explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning Himself. And so Paul does as Jesus had done before

Him. Now we're not told. Luke chooses not to tell us of the Old Testament passages that Paul would have employed in this presentation. He was there all day with them. No doubt he would have had opportunity to cover a great number of Messianic passages in the Old Testament. Though on this occasion we're not told what they are throughout the book of Acts, we have a number of examples, both in the case of Peter and in the case of Paul, of how they make use of Messianic passages. The time this evening doesn't allow us to go through them, but we think of Joel chapter 2 and the day of Pentecost, Psalm 16, Psalm 110, Deuteronomy, Psalm 2, Isaiah 53 and 55, and we could go on. And this is simply in the book of Acts.

When Peter or Paul are preaching how they made reference on many occasions to the Old Testament, and of course many others that we aren't told on. No doubt Paul made use of some of these, and I imagine many others. The point is that his message is not so much soaked in the Scriptures, but it is the Scriptures. Sometimes we speak of a preacher or a message that's soaked in the Scriptures, and of course that's, I suppose, intended as a compliment. But it's interesting, it's not so much soaked in the Scriptures. His message is the Scriptures. He speaks to them, he convinces them about Jesus from the law of Moses and from the prophets. Moving on briefly to notice the response of those who hear the response of his audience. We're told of that in verse 24. Some were convinced by what he said, but others would not believe. They disagreed among themselves and began to leave. We could call it a mixed response. Some were convinced, others would not believe.

But as we think just a little more about it from what we have before us, in both cases the response is a sobering one. If we begin with those who did not believe, we're told that they would not believe.

[32 : 25] And that language certainly does suggest that the issue for those who would not believe is not the lack of persuasive and coherent presentation on the part of Paul, but simply a refusal to believe, regardless of the evidence presented by Paul. And Paul goes on to quote from the prophet Isaiah and speak of a calloused heart. Is this not what we have here? In those who are described as being those who would not believe? Not that they did not believe, they would not believe. Regardless of how persuasive the presentation was, regardless of how coherent, regardless of how well Paul could have identified for them how Jesus fulfilled perfectly all the messianic prophecies that they were familiar with, they would not believe. For their hearts were calloused. But what of those who were convinced? Surely this is a much more positive outcome. Those who were convinced. We're told that in verse 24, some were convinced.

Can we not draw some comfort from those few, those some who were convinced? But here too, there would seem to be the sobering reality that despite being convinced, they also left, it would appear, though we can't know this for sure, it would appear with no intention to return. See in verse 25, it is speaking of the whole group, they disagreed among themselves and began to leave. And what's more, when Paul applies to them this very sobering passage of God's judgment from the prophet Isaiah, everything would suggest that this is being applied to all of those who heard him. Though we wouldn't want to state that with complete certainty or dogmatically. But it does seem to suggest that even those who are described as having been convinced leave without the intention to return. They were persuaded at some level, but they were not converted. They would not turn, to use the language of Isaiah, as it's quoted in verse 27. They would not turn that they might be healed. Of course, we as hearers of the message must be careful not to make the same mistake. But as we think of those who have the opportunity to declare the message, I just wonder how Paul felt. Just thinking a little of Paul in the light of this outcome, how did Paul feel as his fellow countrymen left arguing among themselves and unwilling to recognize

Jesus as the Messiah and put their trust in Him? To use popular language, I'm sure he was gutted. He was gutted. Yes, he was persuaded of God's providence and God's gracious overruling of all things, but I'm sure he was gutted that having spent the day passionately and confidently and personally declaring to them and trying to convince them, he had failed. He hadn't convinced them. And they leave and they go their separate ways. A reminder, if indeed a reminder is needed, that the response to the message lies outwith the power and indeed the responsibility of the messenger. But we close by noting the conclusion of the matter as it's recorded for us from verse 25, the second half of the verse through to the end. As we've already noted, the prophetic word of judgment tragically fits like a glove for the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem. But the final word is not of defeat, but of expectant triumph.

For as one door closes, another opens. In verse 28, therefore I want you to know that God's salvation has been sent to the Gentiles and they will listen. This was, of course, a pivotal moment in redemptive history. And in that sense, not one that we would look to be repeated. And yet, is it not the case that even today it often remains God's way for His church and His people? Doors are closed. The message is rejected. And yet, that is not the end of the story. For the God who closes doors is also the one who opens new doors and prepares receptive hearts for His message of salvation. It's for us to discern His voice and directing hand and to share the confidence of Paul that there will ever be those who will listen.

So, what's really important? May we be ever asking the question, but more importantly, may we ever be engaged in that which is really important and that we have described for us by Luke as he closes this book of Acts, boldly and without hindrance, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ. Let us pray.