



SCRIPTURE SHARED
UNSTOPPABLE
THE BOOK OF ACTS

Week 8: Evangelism

Week 8, Day 1 – Paul’s Arrest and Testimony

Acts 21 & 22, selected verses

¹⁷ When we arrived in Jerusalem, the brothers welcomed us warmly.

²⁷ When the seven days were almost completed, the Jews from Asia, who had seen him in the temple, stirred up the whole crowd. They seized him, ²⁸ shouting, “Fellow Israelites, help! This is the man who is teaching everyone everywhere against our people, our law, and this place; more than that, he has actually brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place.”

³⁰ Then all the city was aroused, and the people rushed together. They seized Paul and dragged him out of the temple, and immediately the doors were shut.

³⁷ Just as Paul was about to be brought into the barracks, he said to the tribune, “May I say something to you?”

¹ “Brothers and fathers, listen to the defense that I now make before you.”

² When they heard him addressing them in Hebrew, they became even more quiet. Then he said:

⁶ “While I was on my way and approaching Damascus, about noon a great light from heaven suddenly shone about me. ⁷ I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’ ⁸ I answered, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ Then he said to me, ‘I am Jesus of Nazareth whom you are persecuting.’

¹⁷ “After I had returned to Jerusalem and while I was praying in the temple, I fell into a trance ¹⁸ and saw Jesus saying to me, ‘Hurry and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about me.’ ¹⁹ And I said, ‘Lord, they themselves know that in every synagogue I imprisoned and beat those who believed in you. ²⁰ And while the blood of your witness Stephen was shed, I myself was standing by, approving and keeping the coats of those who killed him.’ ²¹ Then he said to me, ‘Go, for I will send you far away to the gentiles.’”

²² Up to this point they listened to him, but then they shouted, “Away with such a fellow from the earth! For he should not be allowed to live.”

Understanding the Passage:

In Chapter 21 we hear the narrator of Acts write himself into the story of the early Church again. A lot of ink has been spilled by scholars on just the use of the first-person plural pronouns, but we can’t know for sure who it was. We *do* know that the author of Luke/Acts was a diligent interviewer and investigator (Luke 1:2). The author, we imagine, interviewed dozens of eyewitnesses who were or knew the apostles and Jesus. Some scholars wonder if the author knew Mary, the mother of

Jesus, personally. That would explain Luke's seemingly psychic understanding of Mary and what she's feeling/thinking at various times. The author's closeness to the eyewitnesses might explain the use of "we" and "us" in this passage as well. Perhaps the author was there! That would be the simplest and most parsimonious reading. However, one intriguing solution is that the author may simply be writing in the voice of those interviewed. Like an oral history, the author is simply writing down word-for-word what he's hearing.

This "we" journeys with Paul to his encounter with James. We see Paul arrested in the Temple and Paul's continued proclamation, even in chains. And, again, we see the part of the proclamation that really irritates the authorities: this "we" includes the Gentiles.

He's heard speaking Hebrew in 22:2. This draws the attention of his hearers to the point of silence. He tells his conversion story – a Pharisee of Pharisees on the hunt for Jesus followers and he becomes one. And his new Lord charges him with a mission to rescue the Gentiles (22:21). That, we're told, is what sends his hearers over the edge. This "we" has been this way for so long. This "we" has always had clear boundaries. The Jews have their "we" and the Gentiles have theirs.

For many of us today, we aren't so unlike the Pharisees. The idea that Jesus has blurred the lines of "we" is unsettling. We know people are in our "we" and we have a good idea of who doesn't belong. This causes us to do things ranging from simple clique exclusion to starting wars. The most troubling thing is that the starting point of othering someone in a community can quickly lead to the eventuality of something more destructive.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. How does the story change when Acts uses first-person pronouns like, "we." Does it give the story more credibility? How does the tone change?
2. What "we" are you a part of? How are people included or excluded from the "we" that you may be a part of?
3. How can we, as people who follow Jesus, continue to include people in our "we?" What practices or programs widen that circle?

Week 8, Day 2 – Paul Before the Council

Acts 23:1, 6-9, 12, 16-22

¹ While Paul was looking intently at the council he said, "Brothers, up to this day I have lived my life with a clear conscience before God."

⁶ When Paul noticed that some were Sadducees and others were Pharisees, he called out in the council, "Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. I am on trial concerning the hope of the resurrection of the dead." ⁷ When he said this, a dissension began between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. ⁸ (The Sadducees say that there is no resurrection or angel or spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge all three.) ⁹ Then a great clamor arose, and certain scribes of the Pharisees' group stood up and contended, "We find nothing wrong with this man. What if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him"

¹² In the morning the Jews joined in a conspiracy and bound themselves by an oath neither to eat nor drink until they had killed Paul.

16 Now the son of Paul's sister heard about the ambush, so he went and gained entrance to the barracks and told Paul. 17 Paul called one of the centurions and said, "Take this young man to the tribune, for he has something to report to him." 18 So he took him, brought him to the tribune, and said, "The prisoner Paul called me and asked me to bring this young man to you; he has something to tell you." 19 The tribune took him by the hand, drew him aside privately, and asked, "What is it that you have to report to me?" 20 He answered, "The Jews have agreed to ask you to bring Paul down to the council tomorrow, as though they were going to inquire more thoroughly into his case. 21 But do not be persuaded by them, for more than forty of their men are lying in ambush for him. They have bound themselves by an oath neither to eat nor drink until they kill him. They are ready now and are waiting for your consent." 22 So the tribune dismissed the young man, ordering him, "Tell no one that you have informed me of this."

Understanding the Passage:

What crime had Paul committed? Why was he imprisoned in the first place? The commander wanted to get to the bottom of all this, and that's where we find Paul in this passage. Paul pulls out his credentials in an audience he's familiar with. Paul shares his credibility as a lifelong Pharisee and that at root he's on trial because of his particular beliefs about the resurrection from the dead. This topic already divides his audience. The Pharisees (Paul's home team) believe in the resurrection from the dead. The Sadducees don't. So really, by Paul's proclamation, there's a little something there for everyone. He finds fierce defenders in the Pharisees. They even start to seriously consider the content of his preaching – what if he really was speaking on behalf of God? Paul is pulled away from this ongoing dispute and the next night is encouraged by Jesus, and given his next destination in Rome. The Spirit plots with Paul for his next step.

There's a lot of plotting and cloak and dagger in Acts. Paul has a plan in his spreading of the gospel. The Roman authorities have plots to keep peace and security of their Empire. The Pharisees and the Sadducees, in this passage, secretly plot to get rid of Paul. As it's never easy for Paul, we learn that the Jews (Pharisee and Sadducee alike!) have plotted to kill him. He's caused too much trouble, even if what he says is intriguing. Paul's nephew saves them after hearing about this plot to kill his uncle Paul.

We can easily overlook the sneakiest plotting of all in Acts: God, in Jesus Christ and through the power of the Holy Spirit, plots to spread the gospel through the most unlikely people. Against all odds and in shocking ways, God continues to confound the rulers and authorities that seek to squash the Christian movement. Again and again, the plots of humans fail, but the plots of the Spirit succeed. We get tastes of the plan through spoken words to Paul and the apostles, through strange dreams, and through dramatic prison breaks. But the end of these plots is all common: Jesus, the God-man, rose from the dead and he's seeking you. Jew and Gentile. Slave and free. Powerful and powerless. And this Jesus is going to draw you into his weird new family by any means necessary.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. What's difficult about understanding the resurrection today?
2. Has a plan of yours ever failed? Why did it fail?
3. What might God be plotting in our community and in our city? How can we discern the plan of God that we might step into it?

Week 8, Day 3 – Paul Before Governor Felix

Acts 24:10-21, 24-27

¹⁰ When the governor motioned to him to speak, Paul replied:

“I cheerfully make my defense, knowing that for many years you have been a judge over this people. ¹¹ As you can find out, it is not more than twelve days since I went up to worship in Jerusalem. ¹² They did not find me disputing with anyone in the temple or stirring up a crowd either in the synagogues or throughout the city. ¹³ Neither can they prove to you the charge that they now bring against me. ¹⁴ But this I admit to you, that according to the Way, which they call a sect, I worship the God of our ancestors, believing everything laid down according to the law or written in the prophets. ¹⁵ I have a hope in God—a hope that they themselves also accept—that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the unrighteous. ¹⁶ Therefore I do my best always to have a clear conscience toward God and all people. ¹⁷ Now after some years I came to bring alms to my people and to offer sacrifices. ¹⁸ While I was doing this, they found me in the temple completing the rite of purification, without any crowd or disturbance. ¹⁹ But there were some Jews from Asia—they ought to be here before you to make an accusation, if they have anything against me. ²⁰ Or let these men here tell what crime they had found when I stood before the council, ²¹ unless it was this one sentence that I called out while standing before them, ‘It is about the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you today.’”

²⁴ Some days later when Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish, he sent for Paul and heard him speak concerning faith in Christ Jesus. ²⁵ And as he discussed justice, self-control, and the coming judgment, Felix became frightened and said, “Go away for the present; when I have an opportunity, I will send for you.”²⁶ At the same time he hoped that money would be given him by Paul, and for that reason he used to send for him very often and converse with him.

²⁷ After two years had passed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus, and since he wanted to grant the Jews a favor, Felix left Paul in prison.

Understanding the Passage:

This is, perhaps, Paul’s most winsome speech in the book of Acts. For fear that he may be killed by his accusers, the commander ships him off to Caesarea under guard to Governor Felix to be tried. He’s to defend himself after his accusers make their case against him. Felix is told ahead of time that this seems to be a dispute of Jewish law (Torah) not Roman law.

If we read the High Priest Ananias closely, we see that he isn’t accusing Paul of anything, but implicating the accusers! *They riot because of what Paul has to say. They enjoyed peace until they heard what Paul was sharing. He’s this “ringleader” of a Nazarene sect (that peacefully shares meals, clothing, and home with one another – see Acts 4:32). See! Examine him for yourself!*

Paul, instead of pushing back on these specific accusations, finds common ground. No, Paul essentially says, *I actually worship the same God they do. I have the same ancestors they do. I practice the same religion they do. Their prophets are my prophets. I will be resurrected as they (and everyone) will be. In fact, that very thing is what angered them. Do they not believe it?*

Winsome, indeed. Felix had heard enough. He loosens Paul’s chains and lets him be tended to. More miraculously, he takes some time to listen to Paul talk about Jesus with his wife Drusilla, who is Jewish. Paul’s moral instruction (probably something like Galatians 5:22-23) hits a nerve with Felix and he shuts the conversation down. But the seed of the gospel had already been planted. Ironically, Felix acts immorally and only keeps him around with the foolish prospect of a bribe. In the face of

the moral implications of the gospel, Felix acts immorally for two years! Paul remains steadfast, even after Felix is succeeded by someone else.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. How do you find common ground with someone? What does it do to a conversation or relationship to find common ground?
2. Paul is patient in his conversations with Felix and Drusilla – how can we foster patience in our conversations with others about our faith?
3. How can we plant seeds with others when we talk about our faith?

Week 8, Day 4 – Paul Before the Emperor and King

Acts 25:13, 23-27, 26:1-11

¹³ After several days had passed, King Agrippa and Bernice arrived at Caesarea to welcome Festus. ²³ So on the next day Agrippa and Bernice came with great pomp, and they entered the audience hall with the military tribunes and the prominent men of the city. Then Festus gave the order and Paul was brought in. ²⁴ And Festus said, “King Agrippa and all here present with us, you see this man about whom the whole Jewish community petitioned me, both in Jerusalem and here, shouting that he ought not to live any longer. ²⁵ But I found that he had done nothing deserving death, and when he appealed to his Imperial Majesty, I decided to send him. ²⁶ But I have nothing definite to write to our sovereign about him. Therefore I have brought him before all of you, and especially before you, King Agrippa, so that, after we have examined him, I may have something to write, ²⁷ for it seems to me unreasonable to send a prisoner without indicating the charges against him.”

¹ Agrippa said to Paul, “You have permission to speak for yourself.” Then Paul stretched out his hand and began to defend himself:

² “I consider myself fortunate that it is before you, King Agrippa, I am to make my defense today against all the accusations of the Jews, ³ because you are especially familiar with all the customs and controversies of the Jews; therefore I beg of you to listen to me patiently.

⁴ “All the Jews know my way of life from my youth, a life spent from the beginning among my own people and in Jerusalem. ⁵ They have known for a long time, if they are willing to testify, that I have belonged to the strictest sect of our religion and lived as a Pharisee. ⁶ And now I stand here on trial on account of my hope in the promise made by God to our ancestors, ⁷ a promise that our twelve tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly worship day and night. It is for this hope, Your Excellency, that I am accused by Jews! ⁸ Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?

⁹ “Indeed, I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things against the name of Jesus of Nazareth. ¹⁰ And that is what I did in Jerusalem; with authority received from the chief priests, I not only locked up many of the saints in prison, but I also cast my vote against them when they were being condemned to death. ¹¹ By punishing them often in all the synagogues I tried to force them to blaspheme, and since I was so furiously enraged at them, I pursued them even to foreign cities.

Understanding the Passage:

If you dig deep into the lineage of Agrippa and the Herod family, it reads like an episode of Game of Thrones. The Agrippa that questions Paul in this passage is the great-grandson of Herod – the same Herod that tried to have the newly born Jesus killed for threat of losing his power to this new “king.” Agrippa II, from this passage, comes in a long line of suspicious, paranoid, and self-centered leaders. Paul knows how much Agrippa and his family is wrapped up in the history of the Jewish people and appeals to Agrippa’s knowledge of their “customs and controversies.” There’s a couple of ways to read Paul’s appeal. He could be bootlicking. Paul knows he’s in a dangerous situation (one in a long series of potential executions) so he’s being nice to the man that holds all the power. Given what

we've seen from Paul, another reading seems more fitting. Paul is appealing to the consistent failure of Agrippa's family, the Herods, in stopping the Way.

Agrippa's great-grandpa could not stop this train, and neither can Agrippa. It's bold of Paul, if we choose to read it this way, but even *bold* is underestimating Paul. One might even read Paul's several speeches in front of powerful statesmen as playful – even mocking.

Additionally, Paul shares his credentials as a persecutor of Jesus-followers once again; and, again, there is a rich subtext to Paul's speech. That is, if Agrippa chooses to persecute Paul (as Paul persecuted the first Christians) then Agrippa may end up just like Paul. Agrippa may become a fanatic Jesus-follower in chains. Of course, we know that Agrippa does not convert on the spot, but he does recognize that Paul has done nothing wrong except upturn the expectations and beliefs of Jew and Gentile alike.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. How does Paul continue to stand strong in the face of imprisonment and execution? What might God be doing in Paul that God could also do in us?
2. Paul says to Paul later in the chapter that he hopes Agrippa becomes what he is. What is Paul? What sort of life is Paul inviting Agrippa into?
3. Paul says he is not afraid of death. What hope does Paul have that helps him say this confidently? Can we have this confidence?

Week 8, Day 5 – Paul in Rome

Acts 27 & 28, selected verses

¹ When it was decided that we were to sail for Italy, they transferred Paul and some other prisoners to a centurion of the Augustan Cohort, named Julius.

¹³ When a moderate south wind began to blow, they thought they could achieve their purpose; so they weighed anchor and began to sail past Crete, close to the shore. ¹⁴ But soon a violent wind, called the northeaster, rushed down from Crete. ¹⁸ We were being pounded by the storm so violently that on the next day they began to throw the cargo overboard, ¹⁹ and on the third day with their own hands they threw the ship's tackle overboard. ²⁰ When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days and no small tempest raged, all hope of our being saved was at last abandoned.

²¹ Since they had been without food for a long time, Paul then stood up among them and said, "Men, you should have listened to me and not have set sail from Crete and thereby avoided this damage and loss. ²² I urge you now to keep up your courage, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. ²³ For last night there stood by me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship, ²⁴ and he said, 'Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before the emperor, and, indeed, God has granted safety to all those who are sailing with you.' ²⁵ So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told. ²⁶ But we will have to run aground on some island."

³⁹ In the morning they did not recognize the land, but they noticed a bay with a beach on which they planned to run the ship ashore, if they could. ⁴⁰ So they cast off the anchors and left them in the sea. At the same time they loosened the ropes that tied the steering-oars; then hoisting the foresail to the wind, they made for the beach. ⁴¹ But striking a reef, they ran the ship aground; the bow stuck and remained immovable, but the stern was being broken up by the force of the waves. ⁴² The soldiers' plan

was to kill the prisoners, so that none might swim away and escape; ⁴³ but the centurion, wishing to save Paul, kept them from carrying out their plan. He ordered those who could swim to jump overboard first and make for the land ⁴⁴ and the rest to follow, some on planks and others on pieces of the ship. And so it was that all were brought safely to land.

¹ After we had reached safety, we then learned that the island was called Malta. ² The local people showed us unusual kindness. Since it had begun to rain and was cold, they kindled a fire and welcomed all of us around it. ³ Paul had gathered a bundle of brushwood and was putting it on the fire when a viper, driven out by the heat, fastened itself on his hand. ⁴ When the local people saw the creature hanging from his hand, they said to one another, "This man must be a murderer; though he has escaped from the sea, Justice has not allowed him to live." ⁵ He, however, shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm. ⁶ They were expecting him to swell up or drop dead, but after they had waited a long time and saw that nothing unusual had happened to him, they changed their minds and began to say that he was a god.

⁷ Now in the vicinity of that place were lands belonging to the leading man of the island, named Publius, who received us and entertained us hospitably for three days. ⁸ It so happened that the father of Publius lay sick in bed with fever and dysentery. Paul visited him and cured him by praying and putting his hands on him. ⁹ After this happened, the rest of the people on the island who had diseases also came and were cured.

Understanding the Passage:

The majority of Acts shows followers of Jesus confronted by human powers – kings, governors, commanders, soldiers, etc.... In this passage the elements strike the followers of the Way and the other passengers. The narrator, writing himself into the story, describes a terrifying episode at sea. Paul encourages the sailors with words he received from an angel. He assures them they won't die. He urges them to eat. It seems like Paul has some nautical experience and that proves helpful for their journey. The author of Acts does not make the explicit connection, but for many in the Greco-Roman world, the sea was a center of chaos and battle for the gods. Great creatures lived there. The gods fought for rule over them. The crew of the ship and its passengers would have interpreted their misfortune differently. Paul doesn't address the situation as "judgment from God(s)" but uses their plain circumstances as a means to point them to the God of Israel.

Paul is bitten by a viper when they arrive in Malta, and we see this worldview difference in an even clearer light. Initially the bite is viewed as a mark of his guilt, but once he throws the snake into the fire he's seen as a god. Neither interpretations are correct, but Paul subsequently heals the sick of the whole island. Presumably many were converted by Paul's words and deeds, and the people of Malta ensure the passengers of the boat are well taken care of before they leave.

The conclusion of the book of Acts isn't a tidy one. Paul and the Apostles face trial after trial, even trial by nature. We are left with the expectation that Paul will face more trials (and we know he does from his own writings). Many commentators and preachers extend the ending of Acts to the Church today. Whole church planting movements base their spirit and strategy on this idea (see Acts 29). While this reading may rob Acts of its own intended audience and meaning, the shaggy ending invites us to wonder what the Church is invited to *because* of what Paul and the Apostles accomplished as described in Acts. We are encouraged by their boldness and challenged by their witness. We expect that *we* may face trials, and even in their difference from the trials of the apostles, we have exemplary disciples to model our response and behavior after. We have the charge, as Paul did, to share the good news about Jesus "with all boldness and without hindrance."

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. How has your faith helped you face the hardships of the natural world? How is this different than being confident in the face of a human hardship?
2. What can we learn from the hospitality of the Maltese? How does their radical hospitality impact Paul and the other shipwrecked people?
3. Would you describe your faith-sharing as *bold* or *without hindrance*? What do you need to feel more confident to share your faith? What would equip you better to do so?

Week 8 Video Questions:

1. This week we're talking about the E word – so let's just start there. What *is* evangelism? What is it not? How have we gotten it so wrong?
2. Take a look at some of the "we" passages in Acts – (16:10-18; 20:4-21:19; 27:1-28:20)
 - Share a time when you felt like you moved from "they" to "we" in a group?
 - How do we make others feel like "we"?
 - How can the church become more about "we"?
3. Speaking truth to power: Paul and the Apostles aren't just evangelizing regular folks – they're also sharing the same message with some of the most powerful people around. How can we do that today? We aren't being persecuted or imprisoned for being Christian, so what does this look like for us? What should we *not* do?
4. What's so disturbing about the resurrection? It's at the center of the disputes Paul has with others – what makes it so unpalatable to so many?
5. There are two evangelism strategies found in Acts: You can find common ground with a person, move from common ground to basic theism, and then move from basic theism to the particularity of Jesus. OR you can begin and end with the specificity of Jesus. Which one do you find more effective when talking about Jesus? Talk with your group about why that is.

Prayer requests and other notes.