



## “The End of the Story??”

*Acts 28:17-31; Ephesians 2:8-10*

**So . . . Paul finally reaches Rome. And who brought him there? Caesar! The glorious irony!**

So what is the story of Paul’s end. In the closing chapters of Acts, Luke tells us of Paul’s arrest and trip to Rome after demanding an audience with Caesar, which was his right as a Roman citizen. These chapters are filled with speeches/sermons by Paul, which is in keeping with the rest of Acts. And in the final verses, we see Paul under house arrest, of

sorts, boldly proclaiming the Good News. What irony there is in this. The Romans rescue Paul from his opponents and ship him all the way to Rome, where he preaches that the true king is Jesus, not Caesar! But nothing is said of what came next.

Was he tried and executed then—AD 62 or so—or was he released and later executed, perhaps later during Nero’s reign in AD 67 or so? What really happened to Paul? The truth is that none of us know. In his book on Paul, NT Wright wisely admits that his views on these matters have changed over time and are still fluid.

But one thing seems clear, if Paul wrote 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus, then he was released from arrest at the end of Acts and resumed his work, only to be executed a few years down the road, probably AD 67 or so. That is my opinion. But it is just not something we can be dogmatic about. Here is a bit from Wright:

We want to know—of course we want to know!—what happened next. And he does not tell us. There are, basically, two (or two and a half) explanations.

The half: Luke lived a long time later and simply didn’t know. That is incredible. He knew so much about Paul (or if, according to the sceptics, he didn’t, he was prepared to make quite a lot up). He has talked about Paul’s death frequently; he has told us, again and again, that he was going to have to stand before Caesar; indeed he has told us that Jesus had told him that he would meet Caesar face to face. If he lived much later, either he knew what happened next or he could have invented something.

So the first real explanation is that Luke knew, but chose deliberately not to tell us. This could have been because, despite the long build-up of acquittals and vindications throughout the book, what happened next was a terrible reversal; or it could have been in order to avoid even hinting at the idea that Paul’s death could somehow be in any way a parallel to that of Jesus; it could have been because, even though Paul was vindicated before Nero, Luke for whatever reason didn’t want to make that fact the final coping-stone of the book. He has, as we have seen, carefully structured his story so that it is the shipwreck, not Paul’s eventual fate, which forms the climax, with ‘salvation’ woven into it every few verses.

The second real explanation is one which many have rejected, on the grounds that Luke was writing at least 20 years after the event. But we do not know that for certain (though there are strong arguments which many see as telling in that direction). And I have had the sense, working through Acts, of this second explanation as the most likely one in terms of the form and pattern of what Luke is obviously trying to do. He has not just been saying, ‘Look: the Roman officials will normally do the decent thing, while the Jews will normally try to start a fuss, so go with the Romans rather than with the Jews.’ People have tried that line of thought, but it doesn’t work. I think it is much more likely that Luke was writing this book, quite deliberately, in order for it to be primary, detailed and very powerful evidence available for when Paul himself came before Caesar. The key point in the narrative, in other words, comes just after the end of the book. A colleague of mine, who lectured in engineering, once came into lunch laughing at an exam script he had just been marking, in which the student had obviously spent hours drawing a very complex diagram only to conclude that the key point was located just off the edge of the page. (The student had written ‘and that just about sums up the way life is right now’.) But it isn’t that Luke failed to leave room for the key moment in his story. It is, rather, that it hasn’t happened yet.<sup>1</sup>

Reflecting on Paul How could one sum up Paul’s ministry and teachings? Impossible, even in a book. Perhaps it is enough for now to remember that Paul was a Pharisee and persecutor of the first Christians. That he met the resurrected Jesus

<sup>1</sup> Wright, N.T. *Acts for Everyone, Part 2: Chapters 13-28* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2008), 246–247.

and became his devoted evangelist, founding Christian communities across the eastern end of the Roman empire. From persecutor to pastor. Wow.

I've learned over the last many years that a lot of people today, especially women, have a big problem with Paul, due to the way a few verses in a couple of letters have been misread and then used out of context to sustain patriarchy in parts of the church. It is unfortunate that Paul's mention of how women are being *included* in worship **for the first time in recorded history** continues to be twisted by a literal reading of scripture so as to continue to oppress women! So let's finish this series by hearing from Paul about grace – which many folk are reluctant to extend to Paul.

### **Grace**

We are going to talk about grace—pure, simple, and life-changing. Grace is the unmerited favor that God pours out on us and the unmerited favor that we pour out on one another. “Favor” speaks of a kindness, a blessing, a forgiving, looking the other way when a person makes a mistake or speaks harshly. “Unmerited” speaks of something that is neither earned nor deserved but is merely a gift, with no strings attached, given by God to us or by us to one another.

Sadly, we seem to live in a world that has forgotten the essential role that grace plays in all relationships. I came across this awhile back in a brief essay about the “cancel culture” in which people are banned from society for saying something objectionable or offensive.

And it's hard to shake the feeling that part of what's involved in cancel culture is a breakdown in personal charity. The idea that someone should be expunged from society for holding controversial (or, frankly, even objectionable) ideas can have troublesome implications. We are all of us flawed people, and part of living in brotherhood with others involves trying to see the virtues in others — to not let errors obscure the personhood of another.<sup>2</sup>

The loss of grace, aka “charity,” is one of many tragic symptoms of the breakdown in our culture. But before we turn to the grace that we ought to bestow on one another, let's consider the grace that God pours out on us. Understanding the depth of grace that God gives us all has to begin with grasping the darkness, the sin, in our fallen human nature. If we can't be honest about this, there is really no point in going on.

*Yes, we are sinners . . . there is something wrong with us all!*

A few years ago, I came across a quote from a column by Peggy Noonan that I have shared with you before; it bears repeating. In a column marking the centenary of the beginning of the First World War, Noonan wrote this for the Wall Street Journal:<sup>3</sup>

Once a few years ago a reporter who had covered wars talked about this with a brilliant, accomplished, famously leftist editor in New York. At the end of a conversation on a recent conflict the reporter said, quizzically: “Why is there so much war? Why do we do that?”

“Because something's wrong with us,” the editor replied.

I told him it was the best definition of original sin I'd ever heard.

That's it in a nutshell. There is something wrong with us. Every one of us. All of humanity. We Christians put a name to it, original sin, but that is merely a label. The truth we proclaim, and which has been self-evident over the course of human history, is that there is something wrong us, something that we cannot fix, eradicate, or repair. It is as if we have flaw in our “moral DNA” that no amount of training, education, effort, or good intentions can overcome.

Yet countless people persist in the belief that deep down they are really ok, a good person, someone who can use some help and guidance, but, really, all right. And certainly, good enough for God to embrace us just as we are. But that's a lie, grounded in self-delusion. And it blinds us to the gift of grace that God gives us all.

This self-delusion is growing at a fast pace across the national landscape. Talk to youth and young adults about their beliefs, and you are likely to discover that they have little sense that there is something deeply and desperately wrong with humanity, and certainly not with themselves. This loss of the knowledge of Sin<sup>4</sup> is undercutting all our efforts to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ.

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<sup>2</sup> By Fred Bauer, on the National Review website, September 25, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Peggy Noonan, “The World the Great War Swept Away,” *The Wall Street Journal*, (August 8, 2014)

<sup>4</sup> I capitalize “Sin” here to emphasize that I'm not referring to all the individual wrongs we commit, but the universal flaw in humanity's “moral DNA,” this darkness that lies in the human heart. John the Baptist looked at Jesus and exclaimed, “Behold, the lamb of God that takes away the [S]in (singular) of the world.”

Indeed, I have been convinced for some time that this loss of the knowledge of Sin is the single greatest obstacle to the growth of Christianity in America. The Good News is good news only if it is delivered in response to bad news. Otherwise, it is heard as Good Advice about how we can straighten up our lives or become better people. And no one gets too excited about good advice, much less follows it. Thus, the indifference that American teenagers demonstrate toward Christianity isn't surprising. Kenda Creasy Dean on the findings of the National Study of Youth and Religion:

The good news is that teenagers are not hostile toward religion. . . . Teenagers tend to view God as either a butler or a therapist, someone who meets their needs when summoned ("a cosmic lifeguard," as one youth minister put it) or who listens nonjudgmentally and helps youth feel good about themselves ("kind of like my guidance counselor," a ninth grader told me). . . .

The bad news is the reason teenagers are not hostile toward religion: they just do not care about it very much. Religion is not a big deal to them. People fight over things that matter to them—but religion barely causes a ripple in the lives of most adolescents. Butlers and lifeguards watch from the sidelines until called upon; therapists and guidance counselors offer encouragement and advice. . . . Teenagers gladly grant people the right to explore other religions, or to construct their own eclectic spiritualities, but they are not doing it themselves. So, while religion is seldom a source of conflict for teenagers, it is also seldom a source of identity . . .<sup>5</sup>

### ***The Good News of Grace***

In a culture that has lost the knowledge of Sin, Jesus can seem like an answer in search of a problem, a cure in need of an illness. But losing the knowledge of Sin makes Sin no less real. There has always been something wrong with us and there still is. Any objective look at the last century reveals that our scientific and technological advances have left human Sin untouched.

So yes, Jesus is the answer to the most real problem of all. We are in desperate need of rescue, and we will never accomplish this ourselves. But God has done for us that which we cannot do for ourselves. God has rescued us through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ.

There is no other answer, no other solution. Rescue cannot be had by any other means. There is no other path, no other route. In Jesus, God has done for us what must be done and what we would never do. This is genuinely Good News, this gift called grace, not merely great advice about how to love more or become a better person. This was Paul's message to every city he visited and to every house church he founded.

Like the rest of us, Paul struggled to live out his faith, to live as the person God had called him to be. Paul knew that God had made him into a new person, but he also knew that he had his own work to do in this. In his letter to the Romans (7:14-25), Paul writes dramatically and frankly about his own inner struggle and, by extension, the inner struggles of us all to live out our salvation. He delights in the law of God but knows that he is at war with himself.

Because God can and does work with such power in our lives, it is very tempting to say to someone one, "Come to Jesus and all your problems will be solved." But sanctification is about what we do as well. Will we be givers of grace, growing in holiness?

### ***A final word***

There is one more short piece reflecting on the end of Acts that I want to offer to you, from Will Willimon, one of my professors at Duke Divinity School and a retired United Methodist bishop:

You and I live in the continuation of the story of Acts. Acts must close in an open-ended fashion, with the door still open for work and witness rather than closed by death, because the Spirit is still active. Luke is not simply writing history. He writes the story of the Spirit, the Spirit incarnate in people like you and me. Theophilus' church asked, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" (1:6). When will the story end and all the promises be fulfilled, when shall we receive the benefactions of God in their fullness, when will the power we glimpse in the miracles of the disciples be present forever (28:30)? Luke gives no answer except that the story continues. Living here between the times, as we always have, there is work for the church to do. We need not be gazing into heaven (1:11) when the Spirit is active here on earth. The period of the world mission of the church is now. There is still time to tell what has happened on earth. We need not cower from confrontation with the future, fearful of some cataclysmic nuclear end. There may be tribulation, and some of it may be at the

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<sup>5</sup> Dean, Kenda Creasy (2010-06-12). *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church* (Kindle Locations 333-347). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

hands of our own technology gone mad. Yet there has always been tribulation for disciples—even in times when the rest of the world felt quite peaceful and secure. Our security as believers lies, as it always has, not in the fulfillment of optimistic hopes for human progress, in either technology or super-power arms control. Our hope lies in the hands of a loving and powerful God. This knowledge enables us to speak, even when nuclear paralysis or fear of the future makes many stand in helpless silence. Since Pentecost nothing has been able to silence the tongues of God’s faithful witnesses. In your church and mine the story continues.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> William H. Willimon, *Acts, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1988), 192.