

Acts 28:17-31 “No Stopping the Church”\*\*

**Main Idea:** In Acts 28:17-31 we learn about the unstoppable nature of the work of God. We also discover that God works through people who accept three responsibilities.

Think about it: The story of the church is the story of *apparent setbacks*.

I. When obstacles come, we must face them (17-22).

- A. Paul initiated a meeting (17-20).
- B. The Jews wanted to hear more (21-22).

II. When opportunities come, we must present Jesus (23-29).

- A. Our curriculum is the kingdom of God (23a).
- B. Our authority is the Word of God (23b).
- C. Our confidence is the plan of God (24-29).
  - 1. God predicted Jewish resistance.
  - 2. God predicted Gentile acceptance.
  - 3. God’s predictions always come true.

III. When forced to wait, we must keep the main thing the main thing (30-31).

- A. Our tendency is to focus on what we can’t do.
- B. Paul focused on what he could do.
  - 1. A good minister makes time for people.
  - 2. A good minister makes sure his message is constant.

Wrap It Up: According to the book of Acts, we can be sure of two things...

- 1. God’s work will face opposition.
- 2. God’s work will not fail.

The story of the church is the story of *apparent setbacks*. I say *setbacks* because at times the church runs into challenges, even roadblocks. I say *apparent* because in reality God’s purpose for the church cannot fail.

Last week I shared the account of how Wheelersburg Baptist Church began. We heard names like John Malone, Harris Dodge, and Robert Ellioth, servants that God used to establish this local church in 1878.<sup>[1]</sup> But I would be remiss in sharing the story of this church if I failed to mention that there were challenges along the way.

For instance, there were *financial* challenges. The church minutes from March 1, 1879 indicate that after building the “church house,” there remained an indebtedness of \$921.53 (as mentioned last week, the total building cost \$1828.01 with an additional \$300 for the lot). This debt proved to be a matter of constant concern during the “toddler”

stage of the church's existence. The record of May 2, 1879 states, "Moved and seconded that a committee of three be appointed to solicit help from the public to pay our pastor."

As you read through the original documents of our church, something stands out by its absence. There are *no church records* from July of 1896 to September of 1910.<sup>[2]</sup> What happened during those fourteen years? Did the church even meet? I don't know. The silence ended on September 10, 1910, and the minutes record that the church met "to reorganize," and a motion was approved to transfer the Wheelersburg Regular Baptist Church property to the Ohio Baptist State Convention."

In addition to financial challenges, there were *people* problems, too. On October 4, 1879 the minutes state, "Moved and second that the church appoint a committee of three to visit Brother [D.] and request him to attend our next church meeting and to make any acknowledgements or confessions, as he sees fit." The motion carried and Brethren Malone, Smith, and Ellioth were appointed.<sup>[3]</sup> Sadly, the restoration attempt failed to produce the desiring effect, and consequently at the December 6 meeting of 1879, the church took the painful yet biblical step to withdraw the "hand of fellowship" from Brother [D.].

I suggested a moment ago that that the transfer of property decision in 1910 was made for financial reasons. It would not be long before that decision would lead to *doctrinal* challenges. Just ten years later, on September 11, 1920, WBC severed its connection with the Ohio Baptist Association. The reason? The State Convention which rescued our church financially and officially owned our facility came under the leadership of theological modernists who denied the fundamental teachings of Scripture, such as the inerrancy of the Bible, the virgin birth, the deity of Christ, and so on. In 1945 the church made application to join fellowship with the doctrinally conservative General Association of Regular Baptist Churches. It wasn't until 1971 that through legal action the church was able to recover our property deed from the Convention.

I'll say it again. The story of the church is a story of *apparent setbacks*. That's not just this church either, but of *all* churches.

As we observe our 130<sup>th</sup> anniversary as a church this month, we're taking two weeks to investigate how *the* church began. That's what the book of Acts gives us, the record of the first thirty years following Jesus' return to heaven. Last week we looked at how the book of Acts *began*, and noted that it began with an announcement from the lips of Jesus to His followers, "You shall be my witnesses." This week we'll focus on how the book *ends*, a peculiar ending for sure, as we'll soon see.

There's no way to explain what happened in Acts apart from this. *God* did it. The Lord told His disciples (1:8), "You will be my witnesses, starting in Jerusalem, to the ends of the earth." And that's exactly what happened.

At the beginning of Acts we see 120 followers of Jesus meeting in an upper room in Jerusalem. In Acts 2 the number bypassed 3,000. In Acts 5 it reached 5,000. After that, Luke stopped counting. By the time you come to Acts 28 the church numbers in the tens of thousands and its effect has reached such metropolitan centers as Antioch, Ephesus, Thessalonica, Philippi, Corinth, and finally the capital city of Rome itself.

If Acts teaches us anything, it's this. When our God does a work, our God does a work! What the Lord begins the Lord will complete. That's why we can entrust our lives to Him. He is true to His promises. That's also why it's such a privilege to belong to His church, to be a part of something that is guaranteed to succeed, setbacks and all.

The final episode of the book illustrates this clearly. In Acts 28:17-31 we learn about the unstoppable nature of the work of God. We also discover that our unstoppable God works through people who accept three responsibilities when apparent setbacks hit. Paul modeled each in the account before us.

## I. When obstacles come, we must face them (17-22).

As our story begins Paul is in Rome, a prisoner who has just moved into his own rented house with a soldier

chained to his wrist. He wasn't in Rome on a site-seeing trip. He had come to appear before Caesar to defend himself against the accusations created by the Jews in Jerusalem. The situation had plagued him for over two years. Upon arrival he didn't waste any time in addressing it. Notice what he did.

**A. Paul initiated a meeting (17-20).** “Three days later he called together the leaders of the Jews.” Stop there for a moment. Before we notice what Paul did next, please consider what he *didn't* do. It doesn't say that after three days Paul attempted to assemble legal team and strategize how to save his neck. That's what we may have done if we knew that our life was on the line in an upcoming trial with Caesar. Not Paul. Paul's number one agenda wasn't what to obtain his freedom. His number one concern was what it had been since the day Christ graciously saved him from his sin, namely to know Christ better and to help others know Him.

Brothers and sisters, everything ought to come back to this for us. If something doesn't help us know Christ better or make Christ better known to others, it ought to be low priority to us.

Look at Paul again. Why did he call for this meeting with the Jews? The reason, as we'll see, is that he wanted to remove a potential obstacle, a barrier that was keeping unsaved people from Jesus. If Paul didn't clear up the confusion concerning his own reputation with the Jews, these Jews would never listen to his message about Jesus.

Let this sink in. If people have a problem with us, they won't be open to ministry from us. Unresolved problems hinder future ministry. And it doesn't have to be a legitimate problem, either. A *perceived* problem can do the same thing.

LaSor says there were eleven synagogues in Rome, with perhaps as many as ten or twenty thousand Jews living in the capital city.

By the way, it was only three years before this that Paul wrote a letter to the Christians in Rome. In that letter he addressed, amongst other subjects, the importance of evangelism, especially *Jewish* evangelism (for instance, see 9:1-5; 10:1-4, 14-15). Apparently, there was little evangelistic effort by the church in Rome to reach the thousands of Jews living there.

Bruce Shelley offers this perspective, “It is easy to determine when something is aflame. It ignites other material. Any fire that does not spread will eventually go out. A church without evangelism is a contradiction in terms, just as a fire that does not burn is a contradiction.”<sup>[4]</sup>

So Paul called for the leaders of the Jews, knowing that to gain credibility with the masses it's wise to gain credibility with the leadership. Let's watch how he addressed the dilemma head-on.

Verses 17-20—“When they had assembled, Paul said to them: ‘My brothers, although I have done nothing against our people or against the customs of our ancestors, I was arrested in Jerusalem and handed over to the Romans. They examined me and wanted to release me, because I was not guilty of any crime deserving death. But when the Jews objected, I was compelled to appeal to Caesar—not that I had any charge to bring against my own people. For this reason I have asked to see you and talk with you. It is because of the hope of Israel that I am bound with this chain.’”

When a misunderstanding exists we have several options. One, we can ignore it and pretend it doesn't exist. Two, we can attack the person with whom we have the misunderstanding. Or three, we can address the misunderstanding in a Christlike way, selflessly and face to face.

Watch how Paul did the latter. Indeed, he models for us several guidelines we should follow when facing interpersonal problems.

1. *Speak as you would to a family member.* Paul began, “My brothers.” I talk to my brother in a different way than I do a total stranger.

2. *Focus on the facts, not your opinions or feelings.* In Paul's case the facts were clear. He'd been arrested for a crime he didn't commit. He didn't do anything against the Jews or Jewish customs. Indeed, three Roman officials—

Claudius Lysias (23:28-29), governor Felix (24:22-27), and governor Festus (25:18-19), as well as Herod Agrippa (26:31-32)—all affirmed that Paul was innocent. Furthermore, in three separate hearings the Jewish Sanhedrin could not prove its case against Paul. Those were the facts.

3. *Explain your intentions.* Paul made it clear that he hadn't come to Rome to attack Judaism or the Jews. He was there bound in chains because of what he called "the hope of Israel ." It was his belief in this hope that got him in trouble in the first place. It was this hope that prompted him to ask for this meeting.

Just what is this hope? That's the question what Paul wanted the Jewish leaders to ask. And in a roundabout way, they did. As a result of the meeting Paul initiated...

**B. The Jews wanted to hear more (21-22).** "They replied, 'We have not received any letters from Judea concerning you, and none of the brothers who have come from there has reported or said anything bad about you. But we want to hear what your views are, for we know that people everywhere are talking against this sect.'"

Some find it hard to believe the Jews in Rome hadn't heard any of the bad press about Paul. Surely, if it happened today, with telephones, email and text-messaging, they'd have heard! But 1,400 miles was a long way for news to travel in the first century. And if Paul left Israel on one of the last ships of the previous sailing season and arrived in Italy on one of the first ships of the new season, it's no wonder the criticisms hadn't arrived yet from Paul's opponents in Jerusalem .

But the Roman Jews had heard something. They'd heard about the sect of the Nazarene, and what they heard wasn't good. What was good was that their hearts were teachable. They were willing to hear Paul's thoughts on the subject, and Paul was certainly more than willing to share with them.

Responsibility #1, then, is this. When obstacles come, we must face them. Yes, God is sovereign and His work will go forward but that doesn't excuse us from taking action to address problems that may hinder the progress.

So ask yourself... Is there anyone that has something *against you* that might hinder the future *ministry of the gospel* in that person's life or in others'? Perhaps at work, or at school. Maybe a neighbor, or relative. For instance, suppose you have snapped unkindly at someone. Do you think that person is interested in hearing you tell them about the love of Christ? Probably not. Your unkind outburst has put a barrier in place. What needs to happen? You need to remove the barrier by asking for forgiveness. *Face* the obstacle.

## II. When opportunities come, we must present Jesus (23-29).

The story is told about a couple planning for their wedding who asked the baker to inscribe the wedding cake with the Scripture text, **1 John 4:18**, which says, "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear." The baker made a slight blunder. He put the words of **John 4:18** on the cake. It reads, "For you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband."

When it comes to communication, it takes more than a sincere heart. The words are important. So, too when God opens an evangelistic opportunity. *The words are important.* When the door opens before us, we must *present Jesus.*

Notice verse 23, "They arranged to meet Paul on a certain day, and came in even larger numbers to the place where he was staying. 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."

This probably wasn't a monologue, but a day-long teaching session, done in rabbinic style with question-and-answer discussion and even debate. If we look carefully, we can discover from Paul three essentials for presenting Jesus to lost people.

**A. Our curriculum is the kingdom of God (23a).** "From morning till evening he explained and declared to them

*the kingdom of God .”*

I wish I had a tape recorder or at least a transcript of what Paul taught that day. Talk about a goldmine of teaching! Actually, we have a pretty good idea of what Paul said by examining what he said elsewhere—such as in his sermon to the Jews in Acts 13. James Boice makes the point, “I think it is not all that difficult to surmise what might have been said since the very next book in the Bible is Romans, which Paul had written just three years earlier to explain the gospel to this very community. We may suppose that he followed the general outline of Romans more or less.”<sup>[5]</sup>

Perhaps Paul began by pointing out there is a Creator who made everything, including us. He is the ruler. This is His world, and He deserves our worship.

Unfortunately, as a result of Genesis 3, mankind refuses to worship the Creator, choosing to worship and serve created things instead (Rom 1:25). This is a worldwide problem, affecting Jew and Gentile alike as Paul explains in Romans 2-3. Yes, Gentiles have turned from God to pagan idols—that’s obvious. But Jews have as well, substituting their own righteousness for God’s righteousness. I can just imagine Paul saying, “We’ve missed it, brethren. We’ve substituted ceremonies for a heart relationship with God.”

Nationality doesn’t matter. “All have sinned and fall short of God’s glory (Rom 3:23).” “There is no one righteous, not even one (Rom 3:10-11).” We’re all guilty of treason. We’re all guilty of trespassing in God’s world.

But God did something to reclaim His kingdom. He appointed His Son to be king and sent Him into the world. Jesus is the hope of Israel , indeed, the hope of all mankind.

At this point, Paul would have met resistance. “There’s no way the Nazarene could be the Messiah!” the Jews would have responded. “The Messiah is supposed to be a mighty deliverer!”

To which Paul would have turned to the Old Testament Scriptures to prove, “Jesus is the mighty deliverer!” He came the first time to provide deliverance from sin, and He will come the second time to judge the world and establish His messianic kingdom. Until that great day He promises to save anyone, regardless of nationality, who will repent and believe in Him.

Today He is reclaiming His kingdom one life at a time. When He returns He will reclaim the whole earth, indeed, the entire universe.<sup>[6]</sup>

“But how?” you ask, “How can we convince people that they need to believe in King Jesus?” That question brings us to a second essential for presenting Jesus. First, our curriculum is the kingdom of God .

**B. Our authority is the Word of God (23b).** Luke says that Paul “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.*” In other words, Paul presented his case about the kingdom and sought to lead people to Jesus by appealing to the authority of the Law and the Prophets, the Hebrew Scriptures. He didn’t share his opinions. He shared the Scriptures. Faith comes by hearing *the Word of God* (Rom 10:17).

**C. Our confidence is the plan of God (24-29).** In other words, the reason we can witness with assurance is because we know that God has a plan to save people. It’s a good plan, a plan He designed in eternity past, explained in passages like Ephesians 1 and Romans 8. It’s this plan that motivates us to do evangelism. It did Paul. Watch what happened beginning in verse 24 through verse 28:

“Some were convinced by what he said, but others would not believe [there will be a mixed response to nearly every gospel presentation]. They disagreed among themselves and began to leave after Paul had made this final statement: ‘The Holy Spirit spoke the truth to your forefathers when he said through Isaiah the prophet: ‘Go to this people and say, “You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.”’ For this people’s heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.’

“Therefore I want you to know that God’s salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen!”

There are three things about God’s plan that Paul highlights here.

1. *God predicted Jewish resistance.* Did the rejection of the Messiah by the majority of the Jews catch God off guard? No. He predicted it. In fact, Paul says that the Holy Spirit predicted their rejection through Isaiah eight centuries ahead of time. He said that the reason they wouldn’t accept God’s message was because of a heart problem. There’s something God predicted besides Jewish resistance.

2. *God predicted Gentile acceptance.* Listen to how Paul ended his gospel presentation in verse 28, “Therefore I want you to know that God’s salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen!” What was God’s plan? For the gospel to go to the Gentiles. What did Paul say the Gentiles would do? They will *listen*.

How did Paul know the Gentiles would listen? Was it because Gentiles have better hearts than the Jews? No. They won’t seek God on their own either, as Romans 3:10 makes clear? The reason Paul knew they would respond is because he knew God’s plan. In the plan of God the present age is the age of the Gentiles.

Some people have the notion that God is a frustrated God who is in heaven waiting for people to respond. That’s not the biblical picture of God. The Bible teaches that God is actively seeking and saving lost people. Listen to Paul again. “*God’s salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen!*”

Does that mean that God is done with Israel? Is Israel’s rejection final? No. Paul had this to say in Romans 11:1-2, “I ask then: Did God reject his people? By no means! I am an Israelite myself, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin. God did not reject his people, whom he foreknew.”

So God isn’t done with Israel. Indeed, His intent for saving Gentiles is to provoke jealousy in the Jews. Paul elaborates in Romans 11:25-26, “I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved.”

Yes, God predicted both Jewish resistance and Gentile acceptance. And know this...

3. *God’s predictions always come true.* One day George Muller began praying for five of his friends. After many months, one of them came to the Lord. Ten years later, two others were converted. It took 25 years before the fourth man was saved. Muller persevered in prayer until his death for the fifth friend, and throughout those 52 years he never gave up hoping that he would accept Christ! His faith was rewarded, for soon after Muller’s funeral the last one was saved.[\[7\]](#)

What kept Muller praying? The same thing that kept Paul preaching Jesus to Jew and Gentile alike. He knew that God has a plan to save a people for His glory, and God’s predictions always come true.

Responsibility #1—When obstacles come, we must *face them*. Responsibility #2—When opportunities come, we must *present Jesus*. Now #3...

### III. When forced to wait, we must keep the main thing the main thing (30-31).

Notice what Paul did for the next two years. Verse 30, “For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house.” For two years Paul waited on Caesar to resolve his case. That’s two years of being sidelined from front line ministry.

Most people I know struggle with waiting. I see a contrast here.

**A. Our tendency is to focus on what we can’t do.** We get frustrated because of what we want to do yet can’t

do. “God, why did you let me get sick? There’s so much I want to do for you!” That’s how tend to think. Not Paul.

**B. Paul focused on what he could do.** Notice what he did in verses 30-31, “For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Paul didn’t waste these two years by focusing on what he *couldn’t* do. He poured his energy into what he *could* do. “Like what?” you ask. For starters, it was during this time that he wrote four New Testament letters: Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon around A.D. 60, and Philippians around A.D. 61. We learn a lot about Paul’s perspective during this incarceration from comments he wrote to the Philippian believers (in Phil 1:12-14):

“Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly.”

In two years Paul had a lot of soldiers chained to his wrist—and they all heard about Jesus from him. Barclay’s comments, “In two years many of them must have spent long days and nights with Paul; and many a man must have gone from his guard duty with Christ in his heart.”<sup>[8]</sup>

Let’s take a closer look at the final verses of Acts 28, and we’ll learn two characteristics of a good minister

1. *A good minister makes time for people.* “For two whole years Paul...welcomed all who came to see him.” And many people did just that. They came to see the apostle. Paul mentions them in his letters. In Colossians Paul states that Aristarchus and Luke were with him, as well as Mark, Jesus Justus, Epaphras, and Demas ( Col 4:10-14). Tychicus actually came to Rome to bring Paul news about the church in Colossae .

Another person who visited Paul was Onesimus, a runaway slave who converted to Christ under Paul’s influence in Rome . Paul sent him back to his master, Philemon, with a letter that mentions Timothy, Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke (Phile 23-24).

In the letter to the Philippians Paul said thank you to the believers there for their gifts sent to him. Epaphroditus brought the gifts to Paul, then got sick and nearly died in Rome . Also in the same letter Paul said he hoped to send Timothy to Philippi to let them know how his trial turned out (2:25), sharing this uncertainty in Philippians 1:20-21, “I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.”

It’s obvious Paul didn’t sit around waiting for his trial date. When visitors came, he talked to them about Christ. When no visitors came, he talked to his guards about Christ or wrote letters to care for the churches. That’s the mark of a good minister. He makes time for people. As is this...

2. *A good minister makes sure his message is constant.* Verse 31—“Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ.” What message did Paul preach during the two years? The same message he preached the day the Jewish leaders came. It was the same message he preached everywhere and at all times—the kingdom of God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Sadly, we don’t talk about the God’s kingdom very much today. Perhaps it’s because we’re too preoccupied building our own empires. In gospel presentations today people are invited to receive into their lives a Jesus who is more like a Genie than a King. If we presented Jesus as the King that He is, and if we told lost people that living for Jesus would necessitate seeking first kingdom values over worldly values, our gospel presentations would produce a different effect. We’d see some people who currently make pseudo-professions to add Jesus to their cluttered lives *resist* the gospel. But we’d also see others—those that the Spirit convicted and regenerated—*receive* the real Jesus into their lives, King Jesus. And when the real Jesus enters your life, things change.

So ends the book of Acts. Tradition says that Paul was eventually set free, perhaps because the Jewish prosecution

never showed up and the statute of limitations passed (which helps explain the two years of waiting). After this Paul launched his fourth missionary journey all the way to Spain . During this period (from A.D. 63-66) he wrote letters to Timothy and Titus. Eventually, he returned to Rome , was arrested again, and imprisoned, this time in a brutal dungeon. He never left. After writing his second letter to Timothy, Paul was beheaded around the year 67.

Perhaps you're wondering, "If that's what happened to Paul, why doesn't Luke tell us?" I'm not sure. For starters, he's not writing a biography about Paul. He's telling the story of the early church. And that being the case, this is the *perfect* ending, for it underscores the truth about the church. The story of the church is the story of *apparent setbacks* that God turns into advancements. Let's make it personal...

## Wrap It Up: According to the book of Acts, we can be sure of two things...

1. *God's work will face opposition.* That's important to know as we enter our 131<sup>st</sup> year as a church. God's work will face opposition. And when obstacles come, we need to *face them*. And when opportunities come, we need to *present Jesus*. And when forced to wait, we need to keep the main thing the *main* thing.

2. *God's work will not fail.* In less than thirty years, the gospel spread from Jerusalem to the capital city of the Roman Empire . And as Acts ends Luke makes it clear that the unstoppable work of God was still moving ahead full steam, *boldly and without hindrance*. Yes, there's no stopping the church!

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**\*\*Note:** This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church . It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

[1] Other interesting developments include: On April 26, 1884 the church decided to reorganize a weekly prayer meeting. On March 18, 1887, the church appointed a committee for the purchase of hymn books for church and Sunday School use. In February of 1896 the church elected Miss Clara Lamb as organist and given charge of church music.

[2] I should note that there are also no church records from June 1887 to September 1891, a four year blank.

[3] Also at that meeting, Brother Smith and Brother Ellioth were elected deacons of our church.

[4] [Christian Theology in Plain Language](#), p. 162.

[5] James Boice, p. 427.

[6] An important "kingdom" text for Paul is 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, "Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God ? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God . And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God." (see also 2 Thes 1:5)

[7] [Our Daily Bread](#).

[8] Barclay, p. 193.

