

Kingdom Expansion Our Participation

Acts 28:17-31

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I'd like to begin this evening with a true story of God's faithfulness seen in the beginnings of a church. It could be anywhere and I am sure there are similar stories that could be told of humble beginnings and God's faithfulness to His church. But this story is not about any church, it is about Clearcreek Chapel.

God was faithful. In 1982, Pastor Larry Fetzer of Washington Heights Baptist Church traveled north to Grand Rapids Seminary to meet with a young graduate named John Street whom they hoped to bring on as a Pastor in charge of college and youth. In the course of their discussions, they discovered a mutual desire and burden to plant a church in the expanding southern suburbs of Dayton. A plan was set to bring John on and plant a church in three years.

God was faithful. And in August of 1985, after much prayer and planning, a group of about 45 people launched out and gathered for their first service together. The plan was for Washington Heights to support the new church for three years while gradually reducing their support over that time. But God blessed the new gathering so much, that after six months they were able to take on 100% of their financial support two and half years ahead of schedule.

God was faithful. The small church continued to grow and develop ministries, including a biblical counseling ministry that was at the forefront of a movement. After several years of transitioning between facilities (including meeting in a batting cage where softballs regularly dropped out of the ceiling insulation during services), in 1989 they were able to purchase 20 acres through a set of divinely orchestrated events for an astonishing price of \$20,000. In 1991, the church was able to raise up funds and build this current multi-purpose facility where we meet today.

God was faithful. But the story of the Chapel is not just about people, buildings, ministries, and events. It is a story about God's blessings and goodness poured out upon His people. In corresponding with Pastor Street last week about the Chapel, he wrote the following. "*The real story is about some wonderful people that God called forth by His sovereign grace to raise up a lighthouse for the gospel called Clearcreek Chapel.*" The real story of any church is that God is faithful and that He will build, support, sustain, and expand His Kingdom by His marvelous goodness and grace.

God was also faithful to Paul. In our text this evening we find ourselves at the end of Acts. Paul is in Rome after an eventful and dangerous voyage at sea. In God's sovereignty, Paul appealed to Caesar in his defense before Agrippa. He survives a terrifying shipwreck, arrives safely in Rome, and is placed under house arrest. Through these events, Paul uses his imprisonment as an opportunity to share the Gospel and bear witness to Christ. This is Luke's final account of the growth of the Church; and ends with one last glimpse of Paul's participation in the expansion of God's Kingdom.

This evening's passage is essentially two scenes and a conclusion. In the first scene, Paul has an initial meeting with Roman Jewish leaders. This leads to the second scene and a second meeting with the Jews. The passage then concludes in a short summary that essentially condenses the activities of Paul's two years in Rome in a few brief verses.

Through this passage Luke allows his readers to see Paul's efforts to proclaim the good news of Christ and expand God's Kingdom. We do not have time today, but I would encourage you to see the parallels of this narrative with that of Acts 13. It is no accident that Luke repeats this theme and ends his account of the expansion of the church with this recurring pattern of initial interest, followed by resistance, ending in rejection.

Let's pray that God would help us through this scripture and bless our time in the Word together.

Please turn to Chapter 28 of Acts where we will begin at verse 17. Please follow as I read the first portion of this text. Here is what God's word says.

17 After three days he called together the local leaders of the Jews, and when they had gathered, he said to them, "Brothers, though I had done nothing against our people or the customs of our fathers, yet I was delivered as a prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans. 18 When they had examined me, they wished to set me at liberty, because there was no reason for the death penalty in my case. 19 But because the Jews objected, I was compelled to appeal to Caesar—though I had no charge to bring against my nation. 20 For this reason, therefore, I have asked to see you and speak with you, since it is because of the hope of Israel that I am wearing this chain." 21 And they said to him, "We have received no letters from Judea about you, and none of the brothers coming here has reported or spoken any evil about you. 22 But we desire to hear from you what your views are, for with regard to this sect we know that everywhere it is spoken against."

Luke's record of Paul's witness in Rome starts by pointing us to the Kingdom curiosity of the Jewish leaders. After only three days, Paul reaches out and takes the initiative to gather together the Jewish leaders. We see that Paul's participation in the Gospel message begins with an honest defense of why he is in Rome and a personal connection with the Jews through the reference to the "hope of Israel." Paul points out that his incarceration is not in any way due to an offense against the Jewish people.

While the Jews are apparently unaware of Paul's trial and reasons for being in Rome, they are hesitant, but willing to give him a hearing. It is also clear from the passage that they have made the connection that Paul is a follower of Christ. And it is clear that they do not have a favorable view of Christians. Whether out of curiosity, intellectual interest, or loyalty to a fellow Jew, they agree to hear Paul out and arrange to meet with him again and hear his views.

In terms of our own participation in Gospel growth, Paul's example of taking the initiative and reaching out to those who may be curious or interested in spiritual conversations is one to be emulated. His efforts are not hindered by fear of man, concern over resistance, or the probability of rejection. What a stark contrast to our own fears and doubts that no matter how small, keep us from proclaiming the good news of the Gospel. There is a clear model here of a word ministry that engages the lost with an open and honest explanation of what we are doing and the hope of redemption Christ offers in the cross. No gimmicks or entertainment required; just the simple purity and power of the Gospel.

This takes us to the second scene and heart of this passage. Here Luke recounts the essential elements of Paul's testimony and witness to the Jews. Once again, Luke highlights the repeated resistance of the Jews to the message of God's Kingdom. It is good to be reminded that although Paul has experienced Kingdom resistance time and time again, he never gives up; he never stops the work of being a witness of the Gospel. We pick up again in verse 23.

23 When they had appointed a day for him, they came to him at his lodging in greater numbers. From morning till evening he expounded to them, testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus both from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets. 24 And some were convinced by what he said, but others disbelieved. 25 And disagreeing among themselves, they departed after Paul had made one statement: "The Holy Spirit was right in saying to your fathers through Isaiah the prophet: 26 " 'Go to this people, and say, You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive. 27 For this people's heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed; lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them.' 28 Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen."

On the appointed day, the Jews come back in even greater numbers to the home where Paul is under house arrest. I believe verse 23 contains one of the key elements of Gospel participation. Paul's participation in Kingdom expansion is modeled for us in

three ways. First, we see his tireless effort. He literally labors in witness from morning until night.

Second, we see Paul proclaiming, expounding, or we might say preaching, to them from God's Word so that he might testify and bear witness to the Kingdom of God. The Greek word used in this verse means to bring out or set up something for exhibit. Paul's purpose here is to declare and exhibit the glory of Christ in God's kingdom out of God's Word.

Third, we see Paul convincing or teaching about Christ's central role in the redemption of God's people. Paul's purpose is to instruct and persuade in such a way as to give confidence in that which is being declared. In this way, the preaching and teaching of God's word work together like hand-in-glove to bring forth a heart of repentance. It is only God's word that can work in a way to bring down walls of resistance, conquer doubt, and plant the seeds of faith and spiritual life in the dead heart of a sinner.

Luke writes that the result of the proclamation and instruction of God's word was to bring some to faith. But others, and the Jews as a whole, responded with disbelief and division. Hebrews 4:12 reminds us that the Word is like a sword. You can teeter on its sharp edge for a few moments, but you must soon come down on either side of its thin blade of truth. The point of preaching and teaching the Word is that it will divide between those who believe and those who do not.

At some point as the evening grows late, Paul sees the unbelief of the Jews and ends with a final comment taken from Isaiah 6:9-10. These words are so sharp and so pointed, that after hearing them, the Jews have had enough and leave. Isaiah's condemnation of Israel for the deadly dullness of their hearts apparently hits home. They had ears but could not hear. They had eyes but could not see. So dead were their organs of perception that they could not understand and see Christ proclaimed in the message of redemption. Because of this deadness to the Gospel, the witness and testimony of the Kingdom of God must be taken to those who will listen.

Make no mistake brothers and sisters. Proclaiming Christ, who is the Living Word; the Logos, will divide and separate. Our participation in the Kingdom of God means bringing the message of salvation to those who will not hear and see. Our participation in the Gospel may often go without evident results. And be assured that you will often encounter resistance. There will be some who believe, but many will remain in the deadness of their sin. Like Paul, we must be ready to declare the Gospel of God day and night to the lost so that some will respond and believe. This is the hard and difficult work of those who would participate in the expansion of God's kingdom.

The last few verses of this passage provide a quick conclusion to this final scene and to Luke's account. At first glance, these verses seem anticlimactic. But these final verses are truly ones of triumph and victory. The Jews rejection of Christ and the Gospel is not the end. It is only the beginning of the expansion of God's kingdom. In Christ, the true kingdom of God has triumphed and now extends beyond the nation of Israel. And the really good news is that Christ came to rule and reign not in a worldly kingdom, but instead in the hearts of His people. Let's read verses the last two verses of Acts.

30 He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, 31 proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.

This seems like an unusually quick ending. But there are several key points packed into these last few verses. First, we are to see the power in the message of God's kingdom. Even though Paul is under house arrest he spends two years welcoming all who come to him. The chains and imprisonment of Rome cannot contain the Gospel. God uses even the worst of circumstances to proclaim and spread the good news of His kingdom. Despite rejection and arrest, Paul is able to offer the Word of God to **all** who come and have ears to hear the good news. It is as if Luke wants us to see that the power of the Gospel is not in those who bring the message, but in He who is in fact the Message.

Second, we are to see the proclamation of the message of God's kingdom. Here again we have a repeated theme that the message of the kingdom of God goes forth through preaching and teaching. Just as in verse 23 we read earlier, God's kingdom is expanded through the declaration and instruction of Scripture. The proclamation of the Gospel is born witness when we preach the Word and teach of Christ. We must be faithful to this Gospel mission; to go forth boldly and without hindering our testimony in the darkness of sin. And we are to remember that the power of the proclaimed word is not in the speaker, but is in the Gospel. And if it triumphs in the hearts of the lost, the glory and credit belongs to God and not to men.

This passage forms a fitting conclusion to the book of Acts. Early in Chapter 1, verse 6, the disciples ask, "*Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?*" The answer is Yes, but it was the wrong question. Christ indeed came to restore. But the kingdom He had in mind was expansion of God's kingdom. It was not just about reaching Israel, but expanding His Kingdom to all men of every nation.

A few verses later in Chapter 1, Jesus in his answer to the disciples question says, "*you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.*" And now here at the end of Acts, and even in chains, Paul brings the witness of Christ to Rome. What Christ told them would happen was fulfilled. The Gospel had triumphed and would continue to triumph in the hearts of men. God will accomplish the work of His kingdom. He is faithful. And for the glory of His name, He will sustain and bring about the expansion of His kingdom.

The work that began in Jerusalem and to the ends of the earth has continued down through the ages. The work of the gospel has continued to triumph. Through the

sovereign grace of God the light and message of the Gospel has been preached and taught from church to church and generation to generation. This is the mission of those who would follow Christ.

From the narrow vantage point of our own lives, the vast history and legacy of this mission may be hard to see. Yet our participation as we gather here today is a continuing part of the expansion of Christ's kingdom. Clearcreek Chapel did not start out of nothing. It grew out of a church, that grew out of a church, that grew out of church and so on that goes back beyond what any of us can imagine. While there are exceptions, this pattern of expansion has been carried forth by individuals and groups; supervised by through both intention and out of adversity. We are a part of a divine kingdom mission that is so much greater that it cannot be taken for granted.

As I close this evening, I would like us to get just a small sense of God's faithfulness and the pattern of God's blessing that has brought us to gather here today. I am indebted to Pastor Dale who has done the research to understand the history of kingdom expansion that led to the establishment of the Chapel. I share this, not as a history lesson, but as demonstration of God's work to bring the Gospel to this area, at this time, and in this church.

A highly summarized timeline of the kingdom expansion that led to the Chapel takes us back to the early 1700's and churches part of the Philadelphia Baptist Association. Out of this association, Columbia Baptist Church was organized in Cincinnati in 1790 as the first Baptist congregation in the Northwest Territories. Churches were organized northward and in 1823, what is now First Baptist Church of Dayton was established.

In 1872 Linden Avenue Baptist Church organized as a mission project from First Baptist. It also grew and planted various mission works in the East Dayton area. One of these works grew, moved, and eventually become known as Emmanuel Baptist Church. This church was also influential in founding a number of other churches in the Dayton area. One of those was Washington Heights Baptist Church founded around 1956. Which brings us to Clearcreek Chapel which was established in 1985 and now functions as an independent, non-denominational church.

It is good for us to remember that this church, as any church, is a part of a much larger picture. The work of kingdom expansion is being painted on a much larger panoramic view that spans the time from Paul and the early church to the days in which we live. I think we should rightly feel small in the overall grand scheme of the sovereign work of God to bring the Gospel to all men in every nation.

Our participation in kingdom expansion is not just about the past. The Chapel has a legacy of kingdom ministry that has reached far beyond the doors of this building. The Chapel has sent several men on to ministry including pastors, missionaries, and seminary professors. We recently sent three families to help revitalize a church in northern Cincinnati. And in the last two years we sent substantial funds to a church in Haiti and another in Cincinnati.

Built upon on a foundation of strong biblical exposition, the Chapel's rich legacy includes the training hundreds of pastors in the area to counsel from the Word. John Street, our founding pastor, eventually went on to serve at Master's College and Seminary to bring Biblical counseling training all over the world. In 1999 Pastor Russ came on staff to serve as Pastor for Worship and Teaching. A few years later, Pastor Dan came on staff to spearhead Outreach and Evangelism.

Pastor Dan has labored in both personal evangelism, training, and outreach ministry. His ministry has led to teams and classes aimed at equipping us to share the Gospel and develop relationships with the lost. The preaching and teaching ministry of Pastor Russ, along with other Elders, have fed the Chapel in ways that has led to both maturity and numerical growth. And over the past few years, Pastor Russ has labored to bring biblical training to countries in eastern Europe and Asia.

I believe I can say with humility, that God has used the kingdom ministry of the Chapel to impact lives in powerful ways both locally, regionally, and internationally. In thinking about the breadth and depth of ministries here at the Chapel, I am reminded that it is not about the size of the church, but rather it is about the size of our God. Whatever has been accomplished through this ministry is by His grace and for His glory.

As we reflect on God's work to expand His kingdom we should not be surprised to find ourselves thinking and wondering how God will use the Chapel in the years to come. We may ask ourselves what will our participation in kingdom expansion at the Chapel look like. And while we may not have specific answers for you in this series of messages, I can at least tell you what to expect.

Expect resistance to the Gospel. Not everyone will be open to hearing the good news of redemption in Christ. Expect the road to be hard at times. Not all will listen and the results will not always be what we hope or expect. The work of kingdom expansion will certainly require sacrifice. Expect to be inconvenienced; to serve harder in ministry, to give up preferences for the sake of others. Expect that some things will change and ask for grace to support it. I say this to you as dear friends, not to discourage, but encourage you to be ready in mind and heart.

But also expect great joys in seeing more people receive the Gospel and its transforming power. Expect to marvel at God's faithfulness and goodness in amazing and unexpected ways. Expect to find a heart expanded in love for God as you are poured out in ministry to others. Expect to grow and mature in ways you never thought possible. And expect to pray that God would direct, bless, and sustain the people, leadership, and ministry of the Chapel that it may expand for the glory and honor of His name.

This evening I hope you have a renewed sense of this ministry being God's work. Let us be careful not to view it any other way. *And let us not withhold or constrain His work out of an unwillingness to serve or a lack of faith in God's provision.* Let us not shrink in fear or doubt from the great mission to which we have been called. That Christ will build, keep, sustain, and expand the church is a sure promise. We are God's people. This is His work. And though the all hell were unleashed against it, the Church would still prevail.

Please bow your heads as we pray...