

God's Footprints

I hope you have been reading along in the Book of Acts over the past couple months; I hope you have both enjoyed it and been challenged by it. It's quite the story. As I read these last two chapters I was once again struck by the disasters that Paul seemed to face on a regular basis. In this case, a journey by sea that seemed doomed from the start. A slow beginning; bad weather that delayed them further; and finally when they did head for open water they ran into an unrelenting storm, starvation, shipwreck and more. I found myself wondering, did Paul ever ask God, "Please, Lord; no more adventures"? Did he ever feel that the phrase, "May you live in interesting times," to be more of a curse than a blessing? Did he ever pray, *Lord, please, all I want is a nice, boring life!*

Well, we never heard Paul pray that. What we do hear is that Paul calmly took difficulties in stride; he used every opportunity, good or bad, to point to Christ. Despite the setbacks, he could see God's footprints in them, and trusted in his presence and power.

That's the book of Acts in a nutshell. The birth and growth of the Church; the Acts of the Holy Spirit, starting an unstoppable movement. It's the story of Jesus' 12 disciples, going out and making new disciples, establishing a new faith community that we now call the Church, now numbering about 1/3 of the global population (PEW Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2010). What I want us to see today is both the big picture and the little picture (much as we once studied the Upper Story and the Lower Story). And you'll find your own picture embedded in both. Because the Book of Acts does not finish with chapter 28. It's unfinished. The Holy Spirit is still acting; he is active today; he is active in your life.

Let's take a step back and look at the bigger picture. The God's-eye view. Remember how it all began? Jesus began this movement with the message: "The time has come. God's Kingdom is near. Repent and believe in the Gospel." Jesus set it all into motion – the most amazing person who ever walked this earth. He taught, healed, drove out demons, walked on water, raised people from the dead. He said and did things only God can say and do. He died on a cross (bearing our sins) and was raised to life again. The life of Jesus is the best picture of God's power at work – since the dawn of history. God's promises were (and are) fulfilled in his Son. And then Jesus passed the baton to 12 men with a command to go and a promise that he would be with them always.

The passing of the baton is the story of Acts. Those twelve men took the baton, and in the power of the Spirit, ran with it. They continued to pass off the baton as they went, multiplying disciples, raising up leaders, founding churches all over the known world. It was an explosion of the Gospel! An explosion that took place both on the personal level, in people's hearts, and on the geographical level, throughout the world. And it happened because God's Word *does* what it says. It wasn't because these twelve guys were anything special. It was God's Word doing what it says it will do. Isaiah tells us that like the rain that nourishes the earth, giving seed to the planter and food to the eater, so God's Word will accomplish his purposes. It will not return to him empty but will achieve his desires. And what God started then, he continues to do today. Paul's story ends in Acts 28, but you and I are living out chapter...105, or 1005 or whatever. We are a new chapter of the Acts of the Holy Spirit, not yet written; the story continues because the Kingdom is spreading as God's will is done... through us.

That's the big picture. The time has come; the Kingdom is near. Repent and believe the Good News. The smaller picture, as seen in these last two chapters of Acts, is focused on Paul and his final journey. In some ways, this was the last of Paul's mission trips. Now, it wasn't intended to be a mission trip. His guards thought

they were escorting Paul to prison in Rome. But things didn't go according to their plan; they went according to God's. And every step of the way, God's plan prevailed. The Gospel was preached. God's power was on display. People came to faith in Christ. Sounds like a mission trip to me.

The smaller picture in these last two chapters focused on Paul. But the smaller picture is also that day-to-day life that you and I live every day. It's our own particular journey as we follow Jesus. And the "day-to-day" piece is important. Because *day-to-day* is the only way we can live. Unlike God, we are limited to being in one place at a time; we can only experience the present; we live out our days sequentially. Because our view is limited to the here and now, we have to trust that God sees the bigger picture. We need to listen for his guidance, reading his Word. And hearing his promises, we need to trust them. We need to believe that he will work out his purposes in and through us. That's what life is all about! Not our own daily plans, but God's eternal purposes. That's what counts! *That's* what we're here for.

God had promised that Paul would testify in Rome, and Paul believed it. But he did not assume that this would make his life any easier. Paul still faced the opposition of the Jews, the Roman bureaucracy, the natural dangers of sea, storm, shipwreck; ill health. Life still happens – we do not live in a perfect world – we will not live perfect lives. But even in this broken world, God's promises are intact. They are sure. Paul put his trust in God's promises; it's what made his life meaningful.

One significant result of trusting God's promises was this: Paul was freed from worry. Their progress slowed because of poor winds? No problem; God would get them to Rome at just the right time. Storm? Well, they might lose all their cargo but their lives would be spared. Shipwreck? God would help them find food and shelter, even on an unknown island, until another ship came along. Freed from worry, Paul was able to encourage the others on this tempestuous voyage, using whatever was happening to point to God's power, God's provision, God's presence, so that those around him might also believe.

Paul had his troubles in his life – but God's footprints were all over the place. Now, you can't see God, but you can see his footprints, evidence of where he's been. Remember what Jesus told Nicodemus about the Holy Spirit? Jesus said, You can't see the wind (which is just air, right?). But you *can* see where the wind goes because of the way the leaves blow. That's like God's footprints. You can't see God; you can't hear his voice. But you know he is there because of what he does: his promises fulfilled; the sick healed; the Word preached; people coming to faith. That's God's work. Whether in danger or at peace, Paul faced life with courage and calm because God was there. He could see the evidence.

Once he reached Rome, Paul spent the last couple years of his life in relative comfort. It touches my heart that God gave that gift to his faithful servant. Paul had led a hard life (physically) – beaten and imprisoned several times, often on the run, sometimes starving and without shelter. But the last couple years of his life, Paul was under *house* arrest: he lived in the comfort of his own home, free to receive visitors, free to evangelize and teach, free to write (four of those letters are now a part of the New Testament). Although a prisoner, he continued the work he was called to do – a prisoner and yet, free. And the work done in those two years continues to have an enormous impact on the Church, especially his writings.

You could look at it this way: Paul was free, just limited in his mobility. But free in every other way. And isn't the same for us? Each season of life brings its own limitations. You are young, in school, not yet making a living – you're financially limited. Later, you have small children, the demands of a career – you're limited in time. Along the way other limitations present themselves: jobs lost and gained; your children become adults but you may need to care for your parents. At the end of life, you may lose some health, some mobility, some choices. There are always limitations. And yet, God has given you freedom in the Spirit -- if you belong to Jesus – and in God's perspective, you are free. Freed from the burdens of doubt, guilt, worry. That's big! Free, because you belong to him and you can trust him to see the bigger picture. Trust brings freedom – the kind that counts.

I remember a story told about a certain bishop, who had to leave his calling prematurely because of a chronic wasting disease. It was not long before he was confined to a wheelchair and no longer able to perform the duties of his office. At church one Sunday, a lady approached him to offer her sympathy at his reduced circumstances. But he just smiled at her saying, "Not at all. You see, God has promoted me to the office of intercessor." When you are free, your life is limitless, even when your physical conditions are limited.

The big picture and the little picture. They are interwoven. God's big-picture story hasn't changed: he is still establishing his kingdom on earth. When you pray, "Thy kingdom come; thy will be done," you are saying the same thing twice. God's will *is* to establish his kingdom. Wherever God's will is done – that's where you find the Kingdom at work. It's not just the hereafter; it's also the here and now. The Kingdom is wherever God's will prevails. And God's will *will* be done. Some have said, "It's the prayer that never fails." You know that God will accomplish his purposes. And sometimes he uses you to do it.

So when you are worried, when you have trouble trusting God, remember how he has acted before – that will help you trust for today. Look for his footprints! When God seems silent, this is not the time to skip church nor to let your Bible gather dust. This is the time to put yourself in the place where truth can be heard -- where God's Word is spoken and taught; where his people sing his praises; where you are embraced by his love. The Bible says, "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart." *All your heart* includes the parts that are broken. Bring it *all* to God.

Life is tough; tragedy enters the life of every person – the death of a loved one, an accident, an illness. We still live in a broken world, a world twisted by sin and governed by death. But if you look, you will see God's footprints all over the place. Little mercies – a certain timing; just the right word on a hard day; the help of friends; a card in the mail; the encouragement of prayer. Look for things that make you grateful, and turn that gratitude into praise. That's what Paul did; that's what Jesus' followers have done in hard times (and in happy times) ever since. Jesus said, "Don't worry about what to eat or what to wear; your Father knows you need these things! Instead, turn your attention to the Kingdom. Seek *that*; make *that* your priority; and the rest will follow." Your little picture is embedded into God's bigger picture.

The Book of Acts ends abruptly; it is left to Paul's letters and Church tradition to fill in some of those gaps. The book feels unfinished -- and maybe the Holy Spirit did that intentionally. In some ways, the final chapter of the book of Acts has not yet been written, for the acts of the Holy Spirit are on-going, as he works in and through us. The movement begun by Jesus continues, and there is work to do! God is at work in you! What footprints will you leave? Put your hope -- not in the little things of life -- but in Christ, in what he has achieved for you through the cross and the empty tomb. That hope is certain. And it makes all the difference.

My friends, God's footprints are all around you. You can see them behind you in the ways he has already worked in your life. You can see them now wherever the Gospel is preached, the name of Jesus uplifted, forgiveness granted, people loved and served. And his footprints lead you forward into the future, where his Kingdom will one day be fully implemented. That's where God's headed; and wherever he is, that's where we want to be. You are surrounded by God's footprints as you leave your own prints as well, in the unstoppable movement of God's Kingdom.