

The Last Lap

Acts 28:30-31

Introduction

To be a true believer in England during the early 1500's was a dangerous thing. In 1519, seven Christians were brought into the courtyard near the prison in Coventry, England, in an area known as Little Park. The law they had broken was simply this – they had taught their children how to recite the Lord's prayer in the English language. So, after having ropes tied around their waists, hands, and feet, they were tied to large wooden stakes and bundles of wood and straw were stacked around their feet. Then, their sentence was read, "Only the Latin scriptures are considered holy. The Bible in any other language, including English, is heresy, and anyone quoting the holy scriptures in English is guilty of heresy." The fires were lit, and these Christians received their martyr's crown.

The one man responsible for creating a spiritual revolution in England was William Tyndale. Tyndale decided to translate the Latin, Greek, and Hebrew into English. It was time, he wrote, "to give the plough boy a copy of the Bible that he can read for himself." William Tyndale was successful beyond his wildest imaginations, and his translation soon became the most wanted book in England.

The medieval church mounted a vicious attack against it. Persecution of anyone who owned a copy was severe. The prisons soon were overflowing and hundreds of New Testaments were burned. Believers were even publicly burned at the stake with Tyndale's New Testament tied around their necks.

Eventually, Tyndale was caught. And, after eighteen months in prison, in the month of October, 1536, he was burned at the stake. His last words

before he died in the blaze were, "Lord, open the eyes of the King of England."

Nearly a century later, God would answer his prayer. In 1604, King James I of England authorized an English translation of the Bible and named it humbly, after himself.

The irony of it all was that, when the first edition of the King James Bible was published in 1611, ninety percent of it was simply a copy of the English translation of none other than William Tyndale. He, being dead, yet spoke! "Oh, Lord, open the eyes of the King of England."

A similar prayer was uttered from a Roman prisoner named Paul, who would eventually create the first revolution. And in a matter of months, he would also die for his faith.

I invite you to turn for our final session in the book of "action" or Acts to the last two verses.

When we first opened the book of Acts, the Lord Jesus was giving the disciples the mandate to take the gospel to the ends of the earth. They obeyed their Lord, and Luke has shown us how the gospel did reach throughout Jerusalem, and Judea and Samaria, and now, even to the ends of the earth.

The gospel has now arrived at the center of the civilized world. And Luke is just about ready to put down his quill for the last time.

The Content of Paul's Final Messages

Let us read Luke's last paragraph in Acts, chapter 28, verses 30 and 31.

And he [Paul] stayed two full years in his own rented quarters and was welcoming all

who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness, unhindered.

There are two points to the content of Paul's preaching and teaching.

Point #1 – The truth about the kingdom of God

1. Point number one is the truth about the kingdom of God.

Narrowly interpreted, "the kingdom of God" would be the coming kingdom following the tribulation period, where God, through Christ, will rule and reign for a thousand years. Perhaps Paul was pointing his listeners to the fact that the Messiah will rule one day in the New Jerusalem.

Broadly interpreted, "the kingdom of God" simply refers to the realm where God is King; where the statutes, principles, and laws of God are obeyed and followed; where His name is honored and glorified. That kingdom can be here and now.

Imagine, men, the kind of home you would have if you came home from work one day and announced to your family, "This home is God's kingdom. In this house, we will obey God's principles and His laws, and we will honor and glorify His name here."

Your wife would probably faint; your children would call 911!

Think of the kind of work you would produce if you went in tomorrow morning and announced, "My job falls within the realm of God's kingdom. I want to work in such a way that His name is honored and glorified."

Would your attitude change? Would your ethics change?

Picture the kind of church we would have if we all showed up today and said, "This is God's kingdom. We will obey His principles; we will honor Him in what we say, the way we sing, and the way we serve."

The apostle Paul welcomed people into his rented apartment, and they were not there two minutes before they discovered they were not in just any apartment – they were in the realm of God's kingdom.

Point #2 – The truth about the Lord Jesus Christ

2. Point number two in Paul's preaching and teaching is the truth about the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul rarely referred to Jesus as Jesus. He usually attached the triumphant names of Lord and Christ.

The term "Lord," or "kurios" in the Greek, simply meant, "master; ruler". Throughout the New Testament, the term is related to a number of things; such as, "the Lord's day," and "the Lord's table".

In the very first sermon of this dispensation of grace, Peter, in Acts, chapter 2, verse 21, defined salvation as relating to the fact that Jesus was Lord. He said,

And it shall be that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

It was, by the way, a title that was adopted by the Caesars. In fact, all the citizens of the Roman Empire were expected to offer a pinch of incense every morning to the Roman Emperor and utter the words, "Caesar is Lord."

Paul's message was politically incorrect, and he will die for it. The only Lord is the Lord Jesus; the only Sovereign, the only Ruler is this Lord.

Jesus, or "Iesous," was an ordinary Jewish name born by thousands of Jewish boys and men, and was given special significance when given to our Lord. It is the Greek translation of "Joshua," and it meant, "deliverer".

The last name Christ, or "Christos," was a special title reserved for the Messiah. Peter said in Matthew, chapter 16, verse 16, under the inspiring influence of God the Father,

. . . You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.

So Paul, according to these final verses in Acts, preached the truth about Jesus – He was the Master and the Messiah.

Now, if you combine historical clues as well as biblical clues, you can piece together facts that Luke does not tell us. Remember, if Luke's purpose in writing the book of Acts was to give us the biography of Paul, he would have given us more information. Luke's purpose was to give us the biography of the early church and the work of the Holy Spirit through the ministry of the apostles.

I have done the research for you, so that you can follow the final nine years of Paul's life.

The Confinement of Paul's Final Movements

Here is a time line of Paul's final years on earth:

- A.D. 59 – two years of house arrest;

- A.D. 61 – release and further missionary travel;
- A.D. 64 – Nero burns Rome;
- A.D. 64 – re-arrest in Corinth and return to Rome;
- A.D. 65 – confinement at Mamartine Prison;
- A.D. 68 – execution on the Ostian Way.

Paul's two years of house arrest eventually ended. Many believe it was because of the statutory limitations in Roman law. No one had come from Jerusalem to accuse Paul, so, after the two year period, he was set free.

Did Nero see Paul? Did Paul testify before Nero? We do not know, but we have every reason to believe he did. In fact, the Lord told Paul, in chapter 27, verse 24 of Acts,

... you must stand before Caesar . . .

Writing in the third century, Eusebius states that Paul made two defenses before Nero and was released after his first defense. He used II Timothy, chapter 4, verse 16 and 17a, as further evidence, when Paul wrote,

At my first defense no one supported me, but all deserted me; may it not be counted against them. But the Lord stood with me and strengthened me . . .

So, Paul either stood before Nero during this two year house arrest or later, when he was arrested again.

Paul, after his release, went on more missionary journeys. Philemon intimates that he visited Colosse. I Timothy, chapter 1, verse 3, references visits to Macedonia and Ephesus. Titus, in chapter 3, verse 12, mentions Paul's visit to Nicopolis. II Timothy, chapter 4, verse 13, mentions Troas. So, evidently Paul was released and traveled for several more years.

Then, Nero degenerated into a madman and set Rome on fire, destroying half of the capital city. Listen to the writing of Tacitus, the Roman historian who lived during the time of Paul, as he wrote of Nero's attempt to divert public suspicion of himself onto some other scapegoat:

Wherefore in order to stop the rumor, Nero put forward as guilty, and afflicted with the most exquisite punishments those who were hated for their abominations and called "Christians" by the populace. . . . Therefore first of all those who confessed to being Christians were arrested, and then as a result

of their information, a large number were implicated, not so much on the charge [of burning Rome] as for hatred of the human race. They died by methods of mockery; some were covered with the skins of wild beasts and then torn by dogs, some were crucified, some were burned as torches to give light at night. . . . Men felt that their destruction was not on account of the public welfare but to gratify the cruelty of Nero. (Annals, xv. 44).

Evidently Paul, being a leader of the Christian movement, was re-arrested while traveling, and brought back to Rome to stand trial. In 65 A.D., he was imprisoned in the Mamartine Prison, which had the nickname, "The Rat's Nest".

It would be during this confinement that Paul would write his last letters. He was then beheaded on the road outside of Rome known as the Ostian Way.

By the way, it was only months later that Nero committed suicide. I could not help but contrast these two leaders, Nero and Paul, and the two kingdoms they represented and their two eternal destinies.

Application

I want to make two final points of application as we wrap up our study of Paul's final days.

The most revealing times of a person's perspective are times of great opposition

1. First, the most revealing times of a person's perspective are times of great opposition.

Go back to the very last word of the book of Acts. It is a rather shocking word. Look at verse 31 of chapter 28 again.

preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness, unhindered.

How do you come up with a word like "unhindered"??? Paul was imprisoned! He was chained to a Roman guard. Yet, from their perspective, the gospel, which is the power of God unto salvation, made its way out as the sovereign Lord determined. And that apartment became the headquarters of a global missionary movement.

The same perspective comes through in I Corinthians, chapter 16, verse 9, when Paul wrote,

. . . a wide door for effective service has opened to me, and there are many adversaries.

Wait a second! You do not have both. Which is it – a wide open door, free from adversity, or many adversaries? To Paul, one did not exclude the other!

Can you imagine? “Hey, look at all the challenges and hurdles facing the church – what an open door!”

The most revealing times of a person’s values are times of great adversity

2. Secondly, the most revealing times of a person’s values are times of great adversity.

One anonymous author wrote, “Adversity introduces a man to himself.”

Paul’s Four Values

Now, turn in your Bible to Paul’s last words in II Timothy, chapter 4. Paul wrote this letter while locked up in the Roman dungeon that was nicknamed “The Rat’s Nest”. He ends his last letter to Timothy with some very personal requests that reveal what Paul treasured most.

Look at II Timothy, chapter 4, verses 9 through 13.

Make every effort to come to me soon; for Demas, having loved this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica; Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia.

Only Luke is with me. Pick up Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for service.

But Tychicus I have sent to Ephesus.

When you come bring the cloak which I left at Troas with Carpus, and the books, especially the parchments.

Bring my friends (emotional)

1. Paul’s first personal request was deeply emotional. “Timothy, I want to see you again, and bring Mark with you, only Luke is here . . .” In other words, “Bring my friends . . . I need them and I value them.”

Did you notice the words in verse 10? “Demas, having loved this present world, has deserted me . . .”

They were painful words. Notice verses 16 and 17a.

At my first defense no one supported me, but all deserted me; may it not be counted against them. But the Lord stood with me, and strengthened me . . .

“Well, Paul, isn’t the Lord enough?”

“Of course!”

However, Paul says in verse 21a,

Make every effort to come before winter. . . .

In the good times, our friends know who we are; in the bad times, we know who our friends are. And Paul wanted his son in the faith with him as soon as he could come.

Bring my coat (physical)

2. Paul’s second request was physical. In verse 13a, “. . . [Timothy] bring my cloak which I left at Troas with Carpus . . .”.

Roughly translated, Paul is saying, “Timothy, I forgot my coat at Carpus’ house. Bring it when you come.”

It is so encouraging to hear that the great apostle was a bit forgetful, isn’t it?!

Bring the books (intellectual)

3. Paul’s third request was intellectual. In verse 13b, “. . . and [bring] the books . . .”.

These were secular books – history for one. And, we know from Paul’s sermon to the Athenians how well versed he was in secular poetry. These books were desired by Paul.

Bring the parchments (spiritual)

4. Paul’s fourth and most important request was spiritual. In verse 13c, “. . . especially [bring] the parchments.”

This was a reference to the vellum or leather pieces upon which his copy of the Old Testament was written. Most of all, Paul wants the scriptures.

Charles Ryrie suggested that Paul could then read over and over again such passages as, “All nations before him [God] are as nothing; and they are counted to him less than nothing, and vanity. . . . [God] bringeth the princes to nothing; he maketh the judges of the earth as vanity.” (Isaiah 40:17, 23 KJV) He could also be encouraged to read, “Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee: because he trusteth in thee.” (Isaiah 26:3 KJV)

Lying here in the Mamartine Prison, Paul wanted to read God's word.

As William Tyndale waited in the castle dungeon for his execution, he wrote the Governor of the castle this letter, which, by the way, is the only letter to survive:

I believe that you are not ignorant of what has been determined concerning me by the council; therefore, I entreat your lordship and that by the Lord Jesus, that if I am to remain here in prison during the winter, you will be kind enough to send me from my goods a warmer cap, for I suffer extremely from cold which is considerably increased in this cell. The procurator has a woolen shirt of mine, if he will be kind enough to send it. I wish also his permission to have a lamp in the evening; for it is wearisome to sit alone in the dark. But above all, I entreat and beseech you to kindly permit me to have my Hebrew Bible, Hebrew Grammar and Dictionary, that I may spend my time with that study. And in return, may you obtain your dearest wish, provided always it be consistent with the salvation of your soul. But if, before the end of winter, a different decision be reached concerning me, I shall be patient, abiding by the will of God to the glory of the grace of my Lord Jesus Christ, whose spirit, I pray, may ever direct your heart. Amen. W. Tyndale

If you had only days to live, for what would you ask? What would comfort you? Could you be comforted? Would you rail against God as you sat in the dark or would you draw nearer to Him?

After a few months, one church historian recorded, Paul was dragged from his dungeon cell and taken outside.

Were his crimes read before an audience? Was a mock trial called? Did Nero see him once more?

We have no evidence of any of that. He was simply taken from his cell, and outside the city gates, he was beheaded with a Roman sword.

Perhaps it was done outside the city to keep the Christians, and any other sane Roman, from protesting the madness of Nero. Frankly, the order to execute Paul made no sense at all.

This is like Hitler ordering the execution of several believers shortly before he committed suicide. Sometime before Nero's final breath, as Satan clutched his grip on this immoral, egotistical emperor; sometime before Nero ran from his own kingdom out of fear; sometime before he planned his escape from the palace guard and then packed poison away to end his own life; sometime during those final, maddening days, the enemy of the church whispered in Nero's ear, "You have unfinished business in that prison cell . . . put the apostle Paul to death!"

Paul was not a threat to the Kingdom of Rome – he had encouraged the Romans to pray for Nero and even to pay their taxes to Nero. Paul was the best that Rome could hope to have. But Paul *was* a threat to the Satan's kingdom of this world; he *was* an obstacle to the doctrines of demons; he *was* an enemy of the Prince of Darkness. So, "put him to death."

Nero ordered it . . . God allowed it.

Eusibius, the historian, records for us that Paul was taken one mile outside the city of Rome, and on that road called the Ostian Way, was told to kneel down. The sword was raised by the Roman soldier, and it flashed in the sunlight for a brief moment, and then came down . . . and the apostle of grace, the champion of Christ finished his race.

Paul was the one who said to all of us, in I Corinthians, chapter 15, verse 58,

Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord.

With the ink barely dry and a messenger carrying that last letter to Timothy, even as the sword came down, in those final words in II Timothy, chapter 4, verse 7, Paul declared,

I have fought the good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith

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