

July 12, 2020

THE END OF OUR JOURNEY AND A BEGINNING FOR CODY: AN ORDINATION SERMON

Acts 27:1-28:31

*(17 of 17 in a series through Acts)*

Today is an ending and a beginning. It's an ending in that we're finishing our study through the book of Acts. Acts was the first book I ever preached as a pastor of Cornerstone nearly twenty-one years ago, and I knew shortly after that series (of forty-five messages) that I always wanted to come back to the book and walk through it with a "higher altitude" approach. And now we're coming to the end of this seventeen-week study through the book. That's the ending. But as I noted, today is also a beginning. Today is an ordination service for Cody Hardin as he prepares to begin a ministerial position at First Baptist Church in Joelton, TN. So I want to bring this ending and beginning together by looking at Acts 27-28 and drawing from it a charge for Cody in this ordination service. The glorious thing is that I don't think I have to sacrifice faithfulness to the biblical text or the ordination charge because the points that I think should be drawn from these last two chapters in Acts are the very kinds of things I want to say to the men we ordain to serve as pastors.

Before noting the contents of the charge I want to make to Cody this morning, let me walk us through what goes on in these last two chapters of Acts. You'll remember that we left off last week with Agrippa telling Festus that if Paul had not appealed to Caesar, then he could have been released from prison. But Paul had no choice, and therefore he was ready to be shipped off to Rome. Well, chapter 27 begins by telling us that Paul and some other prisoners are put under the charge of a centurion named Julius, and they are all heading by ship to Italy, accompanied by Luke himself (that's why we see the use of the pronoun "we" so often). However, the journey by sea was not a smooth and easy one.

Almost immediately they face tough winds that delay them (27:7), then (disobeying Paul's advice) they go out at a dangerous time and encounter violent storms (27:13-20), some of the prisoners seek to escape in all of the confusion and are thwarted (27:27-32), they run low on food and do without for fourteen days (27:33), they strike a reef and the stern of the ship begins breaking up (27:41), some soldiers plot to kill all the prisoners before being convinced by the centurion to let them live (27:42-43), Paul is bitten by a poisonous snake as they stop off on an island (though nothing comes of it, 28:1-6), and then they reach Rome. So, again, as you can tell, it was not a pleasant and smooth trip, but they did arrive at their destination. Then, once in Rome, Paul was allowed to stay by himself with a soldier guarding him and people being able to visit with him. In that position, he was able to bear witness to a number of Jews, some of whom believed (28:24), while many others did not. And the book ends with Luke telling us that Paul, "Lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance" (28:30-31). And that's where the book ends. We don't get to hear about Paul before Caesar, but we do get to see that despite all of these difficulties, Paul was still able

to bear witness to Christ again and again, as we'll see even more clearly when we study through the book of Philippians in a couple of months.

Now, on to the exhortations that we can see from this text that I want to issue to Cody, particularly, and to all of us, generally, in this ordination service. First, trust in the promises of God.

### **Trust in the promises of God**

You'll remember prior to setting out to sea the Lord had promised Paul that he would make it to Rome. In Acts 23:11 Luke wrote that the Lord said to Paul, "Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome." This promise had sustained Paul throughout all the trials and years of persecution he had faced prior to this journey. Well, right of the gate on this journey, after Paul tells those in charge not to set sail into the violent storm, he notes that the Lord had reiterated this promise. We read in 27:21-25, "Men, you should have listened to me and not set sail from Crete and incurred this injury and loss. Yet now I urge you to take heart, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. For this very night there stood before me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship, and he said, 'Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar. And behold, God has granted you all those who sail with you.' So take heart, men, for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told."

It is that trust that Paul reflects in God's promises when he says, "I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told" that must be imitated in your ministry, Cody. Now, it is fair to say that Paul was given a specific promise that he would make it to Rome to testify before Caesar, and you haven't been given a specific promise like your ministry in Joelton will be fruitful or encouraging or long-lasting or any number of other things which we all might wish the Lord had promised. But there are a number of things that God has promised that you can trust in no matter how you feel ministry is going. He has promised that he will be with you, that he will work every detail of your life for the good of conforming you to the image of his Son, that he will not leave you nor forsake you, that he'll allow nothing to separate you from him, that he will lovingly discipline you as his child, that he will meet your needs as you seek first his kingdom, and on and on. And there will be moments in ministry that you will feel as if everything is out of control and nothing is happening like you thought it would. And in those moments, you can sit back and ponder the promises of God, saying—like Paul—that you have faith in God that it will be exactly as you have been told in his Word. Trust in the promises of God to sustain you when you feel tossed about by the ups and downs of your emotions, and allow that trust in God's promises to be an anchor for you. Second, rest in the Lord's providence.

### **Rest in the Lord's providence**

God doesn't always fulfill his promises in the manner we might anticipate. I've already mentioned that God fulfilled his promise of getting Paul to Rome—as he said he would—but it involved going weeks without food, suffering shipwreck, being threatened, sailing in violent

storms, and then getting bitten by a poisonous snake. And let's add one more element to this. All of these things happened to Paul with the world going about under God's absolute control. In other words, you would be wrong to say that God was able to fulfill his promise, but he was unable to keep these things from happening to Paul. The Scripture paints a different picture. Psalm 115:2 says, "Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases." Similarly, Ephesians 1:11 tells us that God "works all things according to the counsel of his will." In other words, God is in control of this world and directs all things in accordance with his will. To say it clearly, God was in the heavens doing all that he pleased and directing all things after the counsel of his own will when Paul went weeks without food, suffered shipwreck, was threatened, faced violent storms, and got bitten by a venomous snake. So when Paul says, in the midst of all of this, "I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told" (27:25), he's not only expressing his belief in God's promises—a point we've already made—but he is also expressing his willingness to rest in God's providence, resting when he doesn't have answers for why each of these difficult things are happening.

And these same confusing and difficult realities take place in our lives. God has never failed to uphold one promise in my life. He's been with me, never forsaken me, never abandoned me, and worked all things together for my good. But there have been moments when his providential path for my life has been extremely painful. There have been moments where I've cried out to the Lord, "I trust you and love you, but I hate what I'm going through and can't see how you're using it." Cody, this will be your path as well. The path of ministry is seldom a peaceful stroll through life. If you remember—back in Acts 9—when Jesus told Ananias to go to Paul he said, "For he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name" (Acts 9:15-16). The call of ministry is most often a call to walk down a path of suffering. As individuals and individual families live through their worst moments, you'll walk with them. In order to care for and protect the flock, it'll sometimes mean that you bear reproach. People whom you pour into will sometimes attack you. And in addition to all that and more, you'll simply have your own suffering, and in the midst of it, you'll not be able to shield your heart and protect it because your call is to minister to others, and that is something that you cannot do while shielding and protecting your heart from people.

Now, yes, there are glorious blessings as well. I could weep at the thought of the Lord's kindness in letting me be a pastor of Cornerstone Community Church. It is one of the clearest expressions of his goodness toward me. But it's not hard to rest in God's providence when everything seems to be coming up roses for you. So I want to focus on those moments when God's providence seems as if he is against you.

In those moments, you'll need to rest in the Lord's providence. In order to keep ministering as the Lord has called you to do, you'll need to remind yourself that the Lord is in control and that the road he's taking you down is what is best for you. He's not withholding from you something that would be better for you. He's carrying out his perfect will, and you'll have to rest in that, even on those days when you'll need to say through tears, "Though he slay me, I will hope in him" (Job 13:15). This is what we see in Paul—a resting in God's providence—and it's what you

must do as well. Sometimes he'll lead you through the valley of the shadow of death, but even there he will be with you, and he'll be pursuing you with goodness and mercy, even if you can't see it clearly. So, rest in his providence. Third, persevere in suffering.

### **Persevere in suffering**

If your copy of God's Word is like mine, then there's a heading above 28:11 that says, "Paul arrives at Rome." Now, think about what has taken place in his life just to get to this God-ordained moment of being in Rome. Paul actually outlines his suffering at one point in 2 Corinthians 11. He says that he suffered "imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure" (2 Cor 11:23-27). That's what has brought him to this point where he arrives at Rome. That's what his life of following and obeying Jesus has looked like. And yet I want you to see his response when he gets to Rome.

Here's what Luke writes in Acts 28:11-15, "After three months we set sail in a ship that had wintered in the island, a ship of Alexandria, with the twin gods as a figurehead. Putting in at Syracuse, we stayed there for three days. And from there we made a circuit and arrived at Thegium. And after one day a south wind sprang up, and on the second day we came to Puteoli. There we found brothers and were invited to stay with them for seven days. And so we came to Rome. And the brothers there, when they heard about us, came as far as the Forum of Appius and Three Taverns to meet us. On seeing them, Paul thanked God and took courage."

Do you see that? After all that Paul had been through, he arrived at Rome, and he thanked God and took courage. Paul wasn't turning away. He persevered in following the Lord. That was never in doubt in Paul's mind and heart. And, Cody, so you must persevere. It is a travesty to watch any professing believer turn away from following the Lord, and when it happens it can have an impact on those around him. But it is especially tragic when it's someone set aside for ministry. Today we are ordaining you to lead others in obeying God's Word. We're setting you aside to be one that others will look to for instruction, encouragement, and exhortations in following and obeying the Lord. The turning away of one who has been set apart for the task for which we are setting you apart surely has exponentially more consequences than another. And so we are charging you today to persevere. Keep following and obeying Jesus. There could come a day when you wish you could be anywhere but Joelton, and you may even leave, but you must never walk away from following the Lord and holding fast to him. You persevere. Today we set you apart for this task and lay our hands on you, but we do not do it hastily. We do it after watching you, training you, and believing that you will indeed persevere in following the Lord. As you see in Paul, may you once more imitate—persevere, even in suffering. And finally, do not be distracted from the Lord's mission.

## Focus on the Lord's mission for you

Not only do we see Paul trusting in God's promises, resting in God's providence, and persevering in suffering, but we also see him focused on his mission and not being distracted from it. What does Paul do when he gets to Rome? You'll not be surprised to see that he just keeps telling people about Jesus. Luke tells us in 28:17, "After three days [Paul] called together the local leaders of the Jews, and when they had gathered he said to them . . ." and then he began to testify about Jesus. Then, they appointed another day for them to hear him, and we read in 28:23, "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." And Luke ends the book saying, "He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance" (28:30-31). Paul would not be distracted from his mission, whether in prison, traveling the world, at sea, or wherever. He was teaching people about Jesus—that he died and rose for us and, as the God-man, is reigning over the world at God's right hand.

Cody, you must not be distracted from your mission either. As a minister of the gospel, you must make sure that you and the church is focused on making disciples, baptizing them and teaching them to obey all that Christ commands. There are a thousand other good works you can do as an individual and that individuals in the church can do, but the church as a whole has one mission—to make disciples, baptizing them and teaching them to obey all that Christ commands. Do not lose focus of that mission. And it will be challenging. The world will tell you to be about many other things, to lead your church in focusing on other things, and many other things will even draw the world's applause. Focusing on making disciples of Jesus will never draw the applause of the world, but Jesus prepared us for that.

Today we ordain you to pastoral ministry to serve at First Baptist Church in Joelton, TN, and we charge you to trust in God's promises, rest in God's providence, persevere in suffering, and not to be distracted from the mission the Lord has given you. And we trust that the Spirit of God will empower you to do these very things and so we happily set you apart for ministry now as your pastors will come and lay our hands on you with the full support of your church. Amen.