

UNHINDERED
Acts 28:30-31

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We each are here to be part of something that is bigger than ourselves. One of the greatest fears that anyone should have in life is that he would come to his death bed and reflect that all he has accomplished is a workaday life. He has lived each day simply for himself. Maybe he was a pretty good dad. A loyal employee. But, really, what he was living life for was to have a few hours on the weekend in which to escape the cycle of exhaustion and to begin again.

People who live life like that discover that when they retire they really don't have anything for which they have been living. Their world is broken because their pursuit of small, meaningless dreams has come to an end. No big dreams were ever in place. No real, transcendent purpose in such a person.

I want to challenge you this morning to live your life in such a way that you're pursuing big dreams – dreams that are bigger than your family, bigger than your work, bigger than your hobbies, bigger than even your kids – so that you will know, and I will know, when our time comes, and we find ourselves flat on our backs on the bed of death, that we have been part of God's grand movement. We've been part of the infiltration of the kingdom of God on earth.

The truth of the matter this morning is that when you and I are totally committed to Christ – even though you may be a school teacher to earn a living, your primary goal is not teaching children. Our primary goal is being a follower of Jesus in such a way that we win others to the kingdom of God, influence them with kingdom principles and kingdom values.

You may be a police officer by day, or a lawyer or a clerk. You might even be busy being a preacher. But somewhere, as we set our jobs aside, we must realize that we have given ourselves to something larger than our day-to-day activities. While we may be a bank teller by day, we all – like Superman – have a secret life in which we are primarily part of this grand, marching movement, this army of God that is helping usher in His kingdom.

It's clear to what Paul had devoted his life. He had devoted his life to telling the story of Jesus. When God gave him the story of Jesus, God entrusted a treasure beyond value to him. And he felt like he would be held accountable for how he had treated that gift, that treasure from God. So, earthen as his vessel was, he wanted to hold the gospel as a faithful steward of what God had given to him.

In recent years, there are many movements that have received much attention while Christianity has been greatly ignored. In fact, you don't have to turn on your television for very long to come to the conclusion that Christianity is, in some ways, actually in decline in this world, and if we don't quickly modernize our beliefs, we're going to be pretty much left to ourselves in the end.

Others are even trumpeting that Christianity is dead, irrelevant. No longer a helpful perspective by which to see life.

In fact, if you watch the world news you might quickly come to the conclusion that the Islamic faith will soon take over the world. Samuel Huntington has said, “We know that Islam is the religion of the developing world and that the population is rapidly growing in Africa and Asia. Therefore, and I quote,” says Samuel Huntington, “in the long run Muhammad wins out.” In fact, he argues that in about 25 years we will see a major shift of a worldview from Christianity to the Islamic faith.

Is that really so and how is Christianity faring around the world? And are we really part of something bigger than ourselves?

In our text today, we find the Apostle Paul in prison. Yes, you might stop the messenger, but you cannot stop the message. And although he is in prison, he is preaching the gospel.

I have always been fascinated with the last word in the Acts of the Apostles. It just struck me one day when I was reading this wonderful book of the history of the movement of God. Paul is preaching the kingdom of God and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness. And then that last word. “Unhindered.”

In reality, we know that Paul has suffered so much for the kingdom of God. He who had once persecuted Christians, until he saw that bright light on the road to Damascus, was now being persecuted. We certainly can't be surprised by that because even upon the event of Paul's conversion, God said, “I will show Paul how much he must suffer for my name's sake” (Acts 9:16). On the road to Damascus, he's the chief enemy of the gospel, of the word of God. But God has a divine visit with Paul. Paul sees a vision of the crucified and resurrected Lord. And God later said, “I will show Paul how much he is going to suffer for my name's sake.” And the one who is the chief enemy of the gospel preaches the gospel at the end of the book – unhindered.

I could go through the long list – and I'll do it in the briefest of ways. Hear the words of Paul himself, as he looks back over his life.

In 2 Corinthians 11:23-29, he says,

Are they servants of Christ? I more so; in far more labors, in far more imprisonments, beaten times without number, often in danger of death.

Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes.

Three times I was beaten with rods, and once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep.

I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren;

I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.

And apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure upon me of concern for all the churches.

Who is weak without my being weak? Who is led into sin without my intense concern?"

He basically summarizes the Acts of the Apostles where we learn about those imprisonments. In Acts, we read about him being stoned and left for dead, whipped, and shipwrecked. Indeed, he did suffer for the sake of God – he who was once inflicting suffering against God.

While the messenger suffered, the message is unhindered. In the end, God said to Paul, "I'm going to put you in Rome to preach the gospel there, just like you did at Jerusalem." And that's exactly what happens. "Unhindered."

What is exciting today is that we're part of a global church, a worldwide church. It's always been this way, and yet we've not quite realized it. Somehow thinking that we, as Americans, were the center of Christianity. Or Europeans thinking they were the center of Christianity.

There is an amazing shift that is taking place. There is an explosive growth of Christianity in Africa and Asia, in Latin America – sort of a southern, eastern shift. In just a few decades, Kinshasa, Buenos Aires, Addis Ababa, and Manila will replace Rome, Athens, Paris, London, and New York as the new focal points of the Christian church. The birthrates in Europe and North America are down. Put another way, we're not having a lot of children like we did during Colonial America when we had an explosive growth rate. And Europeans barely replace themselves.

But the world's population is growing. And it's growing in the global South. And as the population grows, Christianity is growing right along with it.

The world is changing. What we do as Baptists, and what we do as First Baptist Church of Amarillo in trying to impact the whole world is important. God has assigned us various tasks. Even this year, we are sending groups to Phoenix, Boston, Hungary, South Africa, and the Dominican Republic.

Sometimes we fail to see that we are a very important part of God's plan, but we need to put some emphasis on the word "part." God has always used this church in a magnificent way, way beyond what anyone could possibly predict. What I want you to hear today is that the gospel is being preached unhindered like it was in Paul's day.

Christianity is no longer first and foremost a western phenomenon. It's not just about Europe and America anymore. Christianity has moved, and we've been part of that movement. Our faith is on six continents where nations such as the Philippines now have a majority Christian population. We are part of a global faith, not a western faith.

There are more people who call Jesus Lord alive today than there has ever been in the history of the church. In fact, according to Jason Mandryk, evangelical Christianity is currently the fastest growing religious movement in the world today. In fact, he is so bold as to say, "Evangelical growth represents more than double the growth rate of the next closest religion, Islam, and more than triple the world's population growth rate." Our faith is truly prolific.

In fact, you can say with certainty today that western Christians, that would be European or American Christians, now constitute a minority of the world's Christian church. At one point in world history, Christians in Europe represented 70% of the Christian population, and now they're down to around 20% or less.

Many of those who study the movement of Christianity say this is the most exciting time possible to be a follower of Jesus because of the global movements in Africa and Asia.

In fact, you may find it shocking, but today the other nations of the world send out as many missionaries as does the western church itself. The most efficient mission-sending nation is Mongolia. One out of every 222 believers in the Mongolian church serves on the mission field.

And one of the most unusual mission movements happening today is not missionaries to China, but missionaries from China.

Sometimes we think it all depends on us, when in reality, it all depends on God. It's called Back to Jerusalem Movement. It's emerging within China. It's a vision of the Chinese house churches to send as many as 100,000 bi-vocational kingdom workers into the nations lying south and west of them, retracing the ancient Silk Routes to Jerusalem. From the Great Wall of China to the gates of Jerusalem, the Back to Jerusalem movement will encounter the strongholds of Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. By some estimates, as many as 90% of the unreached people groups live on this Silk Route.

When it comes to missions, nothing would make me happier than to see the Chinese win, and win big as God has placed them strategically to reach the unreached for His kingdom.

And would you know that today the biggest and fastest growing churches in Europe are almost all planned by African believers?

An ominous tone was sounded by pastor Oscar Meriu, senior pastor of the Nairobi Chapel in Kenya, who named America the third largest mission field and the third largest pagan country in the world. We support missionaries in Africa, but I'd certainly welcome the Kenyans to come and reach the lost of America. African missionaries are found as far east as China and Japan and as far south and west as Brazil and Bolivia. In Europe, the five largest churches are led by Africans.

Korea alone now has the second-largest mission corps in the world. While the mission corps from Western Christianity grows at about 12% a decade, the mission corps from the non-Western Christian world has grown 210% in the single decade from 1990-2000. The number of Korean missionaries today stands at nearly 20,000 serving in 168 different countries.

We often send missionaries to Brazil. In reality, Brazil itself has missionaries working on every continent, sending about 5,000 missionaries in the year 2000.

Christianity is moving to the southern hemisphere. Sometime after 1980, Christians from the southern hemisphere outnumbered northern Christians for the first time since the 10th century. In moving southward, Christianity is in some ways returning to its roots.

If you want to visualize what an average Christian looks like, it's no longer the image of a European gentleman. Rather, "the average Christian is now a woman living in a village in Nigeria or a Brazilian slum." The new movement of Christianity is not made up of the resourceful western countries and peoples, but rather is made up of the poorest people on the planet, people who are the very edge of extinction. People who understand the stories of the Bible better than we can ever understand because we somehow have grown beyond our daily dependence on God for a provision of bread.

Let me give you some specific examples of what we are talking about. There's a missionary in China by the name of John Gates who is focusing and mobilizing the Chinese for missions in Pakistan. The Pakistanis love the Chinese and have a real desire to learn Chinese for business and trade. John takes the groups of Chinese along with westerners across the border from western China into the villages in the Himalayas of Pakistan. Teams have taught English, music, and oddly enough, marital arts. He has even taken mountain bikers to work in this area. Islamic extremists do not control this part of Pakistan, as these villages high in the mountains are cut off from the rest of the country.

Or then there's Peter Yang, a South Korean, who grew up being taught to hate North Korea and the North Koreans, but God has called him to minister them. He began going to North Korea in 1989. He started businesses in North Korea. He has several soy milk machines which provide nourishment for elementary school children, and now his machines feed 30,000 children a day. He has purchased 17 one-hour photo development stores in North Korea which gives him the right to travel in and out, and he can take small groups of Americans as tourists who also carry the gospel with them as they visit North Korea.

What's all this talk about missions around the world about? It's about the last word in the Act of the apostles. Acts ends with the word "unhindered." The gospel is being preached unhindered.

I'm not diminishing our involvement or your involvement. I'm telling you God is busy working around this planet with all sorts of peoples, and we need to join them. We need to realize that we are a part of all that God is doing. "One plants; another waters," says Paul, "but God always gives the increase."

What about you? Have you had a global vision? Have you patterned the passion of your heart after the Great Commission? Or have you and I bought into the workaday world of western culture in its worship of material things and soccer weekends to the point that we have lost the passion of the Koreans, the Chinese, or the Africans who have a heart for what matters.

At the end of the day, God will have his gospel preached "unhindered." Will we be part of His movement?

What is your life ordered around?

When you awake every day, where is your passion?

If you are a believer – in the slums of Kenya or a Pentecostal in Korea – your passion is in the gospel.

And us? In Amarillo? I hope so. Oh, God, I hope so.

Join your church as we cast a kingdom vision way beyond our broken world. Way beyond the borders of Amarillo.

Unhindered.

Some facts and figures taken from *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne, eds, William Carey Library, 2009.