

Sermon – July 28, 2024
“How big is our Gospel?”
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Acts 24:10-21

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill our open hearts anew, and anoint the sharing of these words as a blessing for your people. Use them to fan into flame our continuing transformation into Christ's image and to lead us into fruitful labor in Jesus' mission right here, right now. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen

The Spirit of Jesus in me greets the Spirit of Jesus in you and brings us together in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Good morning! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Pretty good. If I were to say to you, “This is the day that the Lord has made,” would you know how to respond? The response is “Let us rejoice and be glad in it!” Let's try that “This is the day that the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it!” One more time. Let me warn you that we will be using that announcement for several weeks so you might want to write it down and paste it on the back of the pew in front of you. “This is the day that the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it!”

At this point in summer with all of the visiting, vacations, and time with friends and family, we might be wondering, “Where are we in Acts?” We are in Chapter 24 and are closing in on the end of our journey with Paul. There are some miraculous moments to come but we are nearing the end of our journey. Let me give a little recap of some of the last major events for

Paul. Paul is now in Caesarea about 60 miles from Jerusalem. He has been visited again by Jesus and told that he will be Jesus' witness in Rome, and within 24 hours Paul is on his way to Rome with his first stop in Caesarea. Paul is whisked out of Jerusalem by the Romans when his life is threatened by the Jews and he rides all night on horseback to Caesarea, the home of the Roman governor over the land, Felix. I don't know how much we know about Felix, but let me give a little background that might be helpful. Felix is the Roman governor over the province that includes Jerusalem. He has a Jewish wife who John Wesley called the finest woman in the land. She is the daughter of Herod Agrippa I whose death we might recall back in chapter 12. That means she is the sister of the current king of Israel, Agrippa II. Felix has been governor for about six years when Paul arrives and has a reputation for being ruthless when it comes to dealing with the too frequent uprisings in Israel. Paul is in custody in Felix's palace, one of the palaces built by Herod the Great, as an uncondemned Roman citizen. That means there are currently no charges identified against him and he is waiting for the governor to hear his case and give a ruling. Paul was sent to Caesarea by the tribune, the commander of the Roman soldiers stationed in Jerusalem, when he discovered a plot to kill Paul. The tribune was not successful in getting charges against Paul from the rioting crowd of Jews or from the rioting council in Jerusalem.

It takes five days of waiting before the legal team from the Sanhedrin arrives to press their case against Paul. The team consists of the high priest, elders and a lawyer, Tertullus. No lawyer jokes, but Tertullus is not a scribe and expert in Jewish law but is an expert in the art of rhetoric. He has been trained to present rock-solid, no-fail cases to Roman judges. He has had five days to get his case ready and decide what to share with Felix that will get Paul either executed by the Romans or released to the Jews so they can kill him.

We heard his case against Paul read this morning. We probably noticed it starts with Tertullus complimenting Felix in an almost humorous manner. Such a flattering introduction was the custom for how cases were presented. One began by complimenting the judge to get him to listen to your speech and, of course, you promised to keep your talk short. He accuses Paul of being a troublemaker (causing riots,) a charge with political overtones as Felix will be very sensitive to Jews who lead insurrections against Rome. Tertullus accuses Paul of being a ringleader of the Nazarene sect. He is implying it is a new religion not approved by Rome and if correct, this would result in Paul being punished for bringing in unapproved religious practices. And finally, he accuses Paul of trying to desecrate the temple, which was stopped by the orderly

arrest of Paul. We may recall that Jews from Asia stirred up the crowd and they were beating Paul to death when the tribune intervened. These are all serious charges punishable by death. Notice Tertullus calls no witnesses or offers any supporting information other than having the high priest and all the elders concur that the charges are true. They are, in fact, serious charges. There have been many uprisings by the Jews under Felix and while he is notorious for his response in putting them down and keeping the peace, a peace he must keep in order to keep his job, they don't identify Paul as the leader of uprisings. And if we will recall, it is the Jews who led the riots in response to Paul's teaching. If Felix is convinced that Paul leads a new religion that is not approved, he will take action against Paul. The final charge Tertullus makes is that Paul tried to desecrate the temple. When Tertullus says Paul tried, it tells us the charge is false. Paul did not desecrate the temple; they don't really even accuse him of doing so. Trying to do so would not be the same as desecrating the temple. That would mean Paul's death. One key aspect of the trial is that the high priest is supporting action against Paul. His support creates a difficult political situation for Felix. He needs to keep the high priest happy so he can keep his job. Felix will need to be careful as he rules on these charges.

Paul then rises to address his accusers. Paul has not practiced his speech as he has not known what charges his accusers will bring. He stands up, though, in the power of Holy Spirit who, Jesus told his disciples, will provide words for their defense. Paul points out that they cannot prove the charges and defends himself by claiming it is the Jews who are the rioters stirring up people wherever Paul goes including Jerusalem. They accuse him of what they are doing. We see this tactic today with protests on our streets and the blame for the action being placed on those who are not doing anything wrong. Paul points out that the Jews from Asia who made the charge of temple desecration are not present. As a Roman citizen, Paul has a right to face his accusers. Their absence should end the trial, as Roman law required the accuser to face the accused and if the accuser was not present, no trial would be held, and the accused would be set free. Paul also makes the case that he worships God, as his accusers do, by keeping the laws of their religion. Paul claims the Way is not a new religion but part of or within Judaism, which is a Roman-approved ancient religion. Paul goes on to point out that when he was tried before the Jewish council, they could not find a charge other than a disagreement about the resurrection of the dead, a disagreement Paul acknowledges. He also points out that disagreement about resurrection from the dead is not a Roman legal issue but a Jewish theological issue. He does

confess that he disagrees with the Jews on this topic. Finally, Paul says he is blameless before God, that he has a clear conscience before all men and God. When Paul shared these same words in the council in Jerusalem, those close to him got an order from the high priest to slap Paul on the face. After Paul's defense, Felix knows that Paul is not guilty and should be released. However, there are the political and personal aspects to Felix's decision. His political solution is to delay a decision until the tribune returns to Caesarea. He does that so as not to offend the high priest by releasing Paul. Felix also thinks that because Paul brought a large sum of money to his people, Paul will bribe him to be released. Felix also wants to talk with Paul about Jesus and so he will keep him in the palace where Paul is close but will let his friends come and care for him. We are going to have to leave Paul in the palace for two years until Felix is replaced as governor and even then, he will leave Paul for the next governor to decide his case and deal with the high priest.

One of the claims that Paul makes is that he is blameless before God and has a clear conscience before men. We understand the Gospel as God's great love for us, but what Paul is speaking to is the idea of holiness. Paul is seeking to live his life in a manner that does not break God's law. He is seeking to live as God asks His people to live, so ordering his life that in all of his interactions with people, he is blameless. Paul is basically saying he does what is right in God's view and he does not wrong people. We have seen many signs and wonders during our journey through Acts and we have witnessed people being drawn to Jesus through miraculous healings. We should pray for signs and wonders as we go into Jesus' mission not only so that people might be healed of their afflictions, but that people would be drawn into a relationship with Jesus through them. But we should also realize that people are drawn to holiness. People are drawn to people who live differently in the struggles and challenges of the world. They are drawn to lives that stand in contrast to the world and how it seeks to shape how people live and relate to each other. Christians are unique among adherents of all of the world religions. We seek to live as Jesus told us to live, to love God and to love people with all of our hearts, soul, minds, and might. We are not seeking to be good by going along with whatever the world calls good, things that are against God's law. We are instead holy people; we seek to live in a manner that sets us as Christians aside as holy people. God not only makes a way for us to become holy through Jesus Christ, but God enables us through Holy Spirit to live holy lives reconciled to God. Holy lives are in the eyes of those in the world radically different lives. We are not trying to

satisfy ourselves and our desires at the expense of others, but seek to live as God asks his people to live and are empowered to live in that manner. Holiness makes us radically different from other people in the world or it should. We are to be those who live as a people who love each other and keep the moral laws through the power of Holy Spirit. We do the right things before God as we live out our lives in the world. When we falter or fail, we repent, receive Jesus' gift of grace, and then get up and try again. We confess to each other when we wrong one another. We ask for and give forgiveness. It is the language we speak and the way we live our lives. As we are forgiven, so also we forgive. We seek to be holy as Christ is holy. We are those filled with Holy Spirit power, empowering us to live lives that are victorious over sin and helping us realize when we falter and need to seek forgiveness. We may not realize how attractive such lives are to those in the world and we may struggle a bit to live in such a manner. We should ask ourselves, "Are we doing this? Are we living as holy people or even growing into holiness?" Too often we accept the world's standard instead of God's. Yet, Holy Spirit waits to make us those who are living victoriously over sin and growing in holiness. As we seek to be those who are holy, we become witnesses to those in the world who see our lives and are drawn to the hope that we have within.

One of the reasons we may not be living as holy people is that we have too small of an understanding of the Gospel. We are focused on Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection so that we might be forgiven of our sins and reconciled to the Father. We let the endpoint of our Gospel reside in our belief that Jesus died for our sins, was resurrected, and now sits at the right hand of the Father in heaven. In our belief in Jesus, we are justified, and we should praise God for that belief, but too often our idea of the Gospel is too small. It ends with the cross and has only a distant hope that someday Jesus will take us to heaven if we are good enough, and then we can be with him and our family members once again. Let me stress that such an endpoint is a good place to be, but the Gospel is larger than that understanding. The Gospel starts in Genesis chapter one with the creation of earth, and all of creation comes to its pinnacle with God's creation of humanity, a time when God sees what He has created and says it is very good. We should see the lives of Adam and Eve, who are working together shoulder to shoulder in relationship with each other before and with God, as a vision of holiness. All that God created was very good; all was in complete relationship with the Father. Then comes the Fall. Sin enters into humanity with the result that we are separated from God, and creation that was very good is marred. We understand

this idea, that sin has separated us from God and we now need a savior to bring us back to the relationship that we once had with God. Because of sin, all are born with a bent toward sinning. We don't need to teach a child to grab all of the toys, to take them away from other children and to say "mine." We are born with a sin nature. Isaiah reminds us that our most righteous works are filthy rags before God.

Jesus's work on the cross changes our sin nature when we come to believe in him. When we are saved, we are moved from being out of relationship with God to being in relationship with God. We are empowered to live holy lives, to be those who are fully sanctified in this life and in life eternal. We are empowered people, filled with Holy Spirit, seeking to be guided and empowered into holy living with God through Jesus in the power of Holy Spirit. We live in the age of Holy Spirit. But there is yet an age to come. There is another chapter to the Gospel. There is a time when Jesus returns in power. There is a time when a new creation, when the very good of creation, is renewed and is again in an eternal relationship with God the Father. There will come a time when that relationship is restored, when all things are made new. The great rescue plan of God that began before creation will come to fullness at the end of this age. The age of Holy Spirit will end, and we will see Jesus coming in power in the clouds. John in the revelation shares with us, "And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.' And the one who was seated on the throne said, 'See, I am making all things new.'" ¹

The Gospel story began to move with Paul and other believers out of Jerusalem and at some point it came to Burgess and Ophelia. At some point, we heard the good news, we learned about the love of the Father, we saw true love in the death of Jesus on a cross, and we believed. At some point in the great rescue plan of God who so loved us with an everlasting love that he gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believes in him would not perish but would have everlasting life was news we heard, and we believed and were saved. We began to hear a story that called us from death to life. We began to live in a time that ends with the new Jerusalem coming down from heaven, and we will be part of that bigger story where everlasting love returns as a new creation, a time when Jesus returns in power and all things are made new. We have heard the good news. We are starting to see the big story of the Gospel. We are people who

have been moved from eternal separation from God to life with God, from death to life, eternal life with Jesus. Transformation has happened in our hearts and as we grow, we seek to be those who live as God would have us live, as those who love God with all of our heart, soul, might, and mind and others as we love ourselves. We are those who are now empowered to live holy lives, right here, right now, and as we live in that manner, we become those who do small things with great love. We become those who are bold in doing the right things as God has instructed us. We move into the kingdom of God as new creatures of life and not death. Sometimes when we hear the good news, we catch a glimpse of the bigger story and glimpse more clearly how God is at work not just in our lives but in all peoples' lives. Yet, too often we think that we can't do this; we just can't live as God wants us to live. Yet, God made a way not only for us to be reconciled to him through Jesus but to live as his people, those filled with power from on high who choose the right. Holiness is not just a someday goal that if we try harder, we can achieve. It is a gift that if we will accept, will empower us to live lives set apart for God. And when we live in this manner, the world notices. The world is drawn to holiness. Those in the world who are seeking meaningful lives in all the wrong places notice holiness as light shining into their darkness and are drawn to it. Holiness is our pathway to be witnesses for Jesus by living as he asked and empowered us to live. Holiness can be seen as we do small things with great love for those we meet as we follow Jesus into his mission.

Pray with me. Jesus, help us to see the big picture of the Gospel. As we glimpse more fully the complete story of your good news, transform us through Holy Spirit power into those who not only seek to live as you ask us to live but through Holy Spirit are such people. Lord, empower us with your Spirit that we might be light into our community. We pray in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen

The Spirit of the Lord is upon us, because he has anointed us to bring good news to the poor. He has sent us to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Empower us for holiness as we step into your mission more fully. Amen

ⁱ Bibles, Harper. NRSV Bible with the Apocrypha (p. 3629). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.