

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

(October 29, 2017)

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Sermon manuscript

**Sermon Series:** Disciples, On the GO!

(Studies of the book of Acts)

### **Unhindered**

(Acts 20:1--28:28; 28:30-31)

Study #24

#### **Introduction: Roadblocks...**

In 2014, Kathy and I decided we would celebrate our thirty-five years of marriage in a big way. So, we took a trip to Glacier National Park in Montana. Glacier is called "The Crown of the Continent" for good reason. The place is truly majestic.

One of the highlights for people who go to Glacier is driving through the park on "Going to the Sun" road. We were eager to take that drive, see the sights, get scared on the hairpin curves.

Well, it turned out that there had been so much snow in the northern Rockies during the winter of 2013/ 2014 that on the week we were at the Park - the last week of June! - the road was still closed due to snow. Our way was blocked from doing what we wanted to do.

When, back in September, the team from Northwest finished a couple of days of work in Houston following Hurricane Harvey, leaving the city turned out to be an exercise in frustration. It took two full hours to simply get out of town because of all the blocked roads due to still-flooded streets. Again, blockages.

I've told you before about my teenaged dreams of playing basketball in the NBA, dreams that were blocked, due to my lack of height - and talent.

As I list these roadblocks - either literal or figurative blocked roads - you are probably thinking of dreams you've had, things you've longed to do, that got blocked.

Maybe something got in the way of the career path you had dreamed of taking. Or family plans were delayed, held back. The school of your choice said "No."

Life will often throw roadblocks our way that will obstruct a clear path to our dreams. Those barriers can be frustrating. They can color all of life a dull grey and leave us paralyzed, hindered from making any move at all.

Sometimes, we even face barriers that keep us from doing what we'd love to do for Jesus.

You have long wanted to start a Bible study at work or school, but there are complicating obstacles. And you'd love to exercise your hospitality muscle, but schedules won't cooperate.

Your neighbor is a great guy, but you've not yet let him know of your commitment to Jesus, asked him how you could pray for him, or turned a friendly conversation a bit deeper. It's just never seemed like the right time. You've held back. You don't want to be weird or to be rejected.

This morning I'm finishing up our series of studies in the book of Acts. We've been looking into Acts for several months, and I've learned a lot about walking with Jesus from the stories of the first disciples. I hope you have, too.

In our time together today, we're going to view a long chapter in the life of the Apostle Paul that involves several chapters in Acts. And we're going to see that his life was very much like ours.

Like us, he wanted to move forward in life. He had dreams - especially for serving Jesus - and those dreams were blocked by enemies, by red tape, by stormy seas - you name it.

And we'll see that the ending of Acts, as it tells Paul's story, is among the best, "*Well, I never saw that coming!*" endings in the Bible. It's an ending that just might lead you to a fresh perspective and to new beginnings.

We're going to wind up at the end of Acts. To get there, I'm going to back up and take a running start a few chapters before the end so that we can all see how Paul ended up where we see him at the end.<sup>1</sup>

## **On the Way to Rome**

### **Leading up to an Appeal to Caesar**

*The risky decision to go to Jerusalem (Acts 18:21)*

It was while he was spreading the Gospel in the city of Ephesus that he decided that he would go to Jerusalem - again! to present Jesus to His people, the Jews. Simple decision. Good plan.

Well, several good friends warned him to NOT take this trip. They knew that he would face lots of trouble if he went to Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup> But this was Paul's dream. He was determined to go, and he went.

He received a very warm welcome from the Christians in Jerusalem, which doesn't surprise us. But he didn't get anything like the same when he went to the temple, which, again, doesn't surprise us.

*Speak, get attacked, get rescued, repeat (Acts 21-23)*

Remember, he went to Jerusalem to present Jesus to his fellow-Jews. And in Acts 21-23, we read of three attempts by Paul to do so.

The first time (21:27), he didn't even have a chance to open his mouth before he was attacked. The second time, he got through his testimony - but not to the Gospel - and was then attacked. (22:1-22)

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<sup>1</sup> Some of this was presented by the Apostle Paul himself on October 15 when he spoke to our church. (a drama presented by yours truly; a video of the drama is available on the church website under "Messages")

<sup>2</sup> See Acts 20:23, 37-38; 21:4, 10-14.

The third time, speaking to the High Court of Israel - the Sanhedrin - he barely spoke, got controversial and caused dissension among his listeners, and was about to be attacked when he was rescued at the last minute by Roman soldiers. (23:1-10)

In fact, each time he tried to speak, he was rescued by these soldiers whose job was to keep the peace in the city. Three times, they took him back to their barracks to protect him. And I'm sure that the soldiers were getting tired of having to rescue Paul.

And then, when they heard that a group of forty men had taken an oath that they wouldn't eat or drink anything until they had killed Paul, these soldiers knew that they wouldn't be able to keep Paul safe in Jerusalem. So, with a heavily armed guard, they marched him north about sixty or seventy miles to the city of Caesarea.

The hoped-for revival in Jerusalem never happened. Paul left never having been able to clearly present Jesus to the Jews. That's a very disappointing blockage.

But, in Caesarea, at least he was safe. In jail, but safe. Sadly, the Jerusalem opposition followed him.

*In Caesarea (Acts 24-26)*

He was forced to defend himself from the legal attacks of the opposition's attorney, Tertullus, in front of the governor, Felix.

Felix knew that Paul was innocent of the charges against him. And, he could have easily let Paul go free when he stopped being the governor.

But, Felix wanted to do the Jews a favor, so he kept Paul in jail in Caesarea for two long years. When Felix left office, Festus became governor, which prompted the Jerusalem opposition to make another trip to try to make their charges against Paul stick. They demanded that Festus release Paul and send him back to Jerusalem to stand trial.

While that sounds like a reasonable request, it was really just an excuse to get Paul away from the protection of the city, so as to make it easier to kill him.

Knowing this, Paul exercised the right every Roman citizen had and appealed his case to Caesar. To which Festus replied, **[25:12] “You have appealed to Caesar, to Caesar you shall go.”**<sup>3</sup>

And, since Caesar was in Rome, Paul now had to travel to Rome, which was OK, since he had long been hoping that he’s be able to get to Rome (See Acts 19:21).

But, given what we’ve seen so far, we’re not surprised that the journey to Rome wasn’t exactly smooth sailing.

### **On the High Seas (Acts 27:1--28:10)**

#### *Launching for Italy*

Paul had friends with him on this trip. Aristarchus (27:2) and Luke were with him, and maybe others.

But, on this trip, he was first and foremost a prisoner of Rome. So, Paul was chained to a Roman centurion named Julius the whole time he was on board ship. Again, a roadblock to freedom.

The ship set sail in the September / October time frame,<sup>4</sup> the most dangerous time of year to travel on the Mediterranean, and sailing was hard from the beginning.

All went OK as far as the island of Crete. However, once they got around Crete, out in the open Adriatic Sea, they were caught up in a raging storm.

<sup>3</sup> Before leaving for Rome, Paul also had the opportunity to share Jesus with King Herod Agrippa II, the ruler of all Palestine. (26:1-32) Thus, despite being in jail, he ended up doing in Caesarea what Jesus had told him he would do, which was to testify before governors and kings. (Acts 9:15)

<sup>4</sup> Luke mentions that “*the fast*” was over (v. 9), a reference to the fast of the Day of Atonement, which occurs in late September/early October.

#### *Shipwreck*

#### Storm at sea (Acts 27)

They were fourteen days with no sun during the day and no stars at night. The storm continued non-stop with the wind and the waves battering the ship. They had to throw the cargo overboard, and eventually the food, too, to lighten the load.

Here’s Luke’s description. **[20] *Since neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small storm was assailing us, from then on all hope of our being saved was gradually abandoned.***

Acts 27 makes a land-lubber like me cringe. I can’t even imagine how terrifying it would be to face seas like this. It looks like Paul’s life is over, lost at sea, no more chances to share the Gospel.

Now, this is just an aside, but as cringeworthy as the storm is, for me, equally cringeworthy is Paul’s comment to his shipmates in the middle of the storm.

The storm has been blowing for days, nobody has eaten for days, they have all abandoned any hope of survival, and Paul, who had previously warned them against proceeding (v. 10), now stands up and tells them all, **[21] “Men, you ought to have followed my advice and not to have set sail from Crete.”**

It may have been a miracle that the crew didn’t throw Paul overboard at that point.

They didn’t, though, and Paul continued. He told them that an angel of God had appeared to him and told him that they would all survive, ending with this: **[25] “Therefore, keep up your courage, men, for I believe God that it will turn out exactly as I have been told. [26] But we must run aground on a certain island.”**

And that is exactly what happened. All two hundred and seventy-six souls on board the ship were delivered safe and sound when they beached on the little island of Malta.

The ship broke in pieces - meaning that Paul is now stranded - but everybody lived, and Paul and his companions and his guard stayed on Malta for three long months.

#### On Malta (28:1-10)

On the night of their landing, the natives built a fire to warm those who had had to swim ashore in the cold weather. And everything went well on that night, except for the little incident with the snake...

As Paul was gathering firewood, he was bitten by a poisonous snake. Again, this would seem to present a roadblock to a happy stay on Malta.<sup>5</sup> The natives jumped to what seemed like a logical conclusion.

***[4] When the natives saw the creature hanging from his hand, they began saying to one another, “Undoubtedly this man is a murderer, and though he has been saved from the sea, justice has not allowed him to live.”***

But, when they saw that Paul wasn't affected by the snake's bite, they re-considered.

***[6b]...But after they had waited a long time and had seen nothing unusual happen to him, they changed their minds and began to say that he was a god - which would have been terribly frustrating to Paul!***

At the end of those three months, during which time God had given Paul a powerful ministry of healing and great favor with the people of Malta (vv. 7-10), the weather cleared.

Paul left Malta and sailed north, landing at the harbor town of Puteoli on the western shore of Italy.

Paul and his guard and friends found hospitality with some Christians just outside Rome, and stayed with them for seven wonderful days of refreshing connection.

#### *To Rome*

Then, finally, roughly a year after leaving Caesarea, Paul entered the city of Rome. The description of his situation in Rome is, at least to me, a mixed bag of good and not so good news.

***[16] When we entered Rome, Paul was allowed to stay by himself, with the soldier who was guarding him.***

He's actually not in jail. He's not in a prison's dungeon like he was in Philippi or like he will be at the end of his life.<sup>6</sup> He's in his own rented quarters.

But he was in Roman custody. This is house arrest. And he was chained to a Roman soldier. At all times.

In this situation, Paul moved ahead to spread the Gospel.

The first order of business was to invite the leaders of the Jewish community in Rome to his quarters for a meet-and-greet.

#### When in Rome (vv. 17-31)

##### **Paul Speaks to the Jews (vv. 17-29)**

*The first meeting with the Jews of Rome (vv. 17-22)*

#### Paul's "hello" (vv. 17-20)

When the guests arrived, Paul began by answering a question they hadn't asked. Specifically, why was he, a former Pharisee, chained to an elite Roman soldier and under house arrest in the capitol?

***[17b]...“Brethren, though I had done nothing against our people or the customs of our fathers, yet I was delivered as a prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans.***

<sup>5</sup> That is the meaning of “viper.”

<sup>6</sup> See Acts 16 for his Philippian jail time. When he wrote 2 Timothy soon before his martyrdom, he was in a rough dungeon in Rome.

**[18] “And when they had examined me, they were willing to release me because there was no ground for putting me to death.  
[19] “But when the Jews objected, I was forced to appeal to Caesar, not that I had any accusation against my nation.**

So, we’re following Paul here. He didn’t want these Roman Jews to think that he had appealed to Caesar to lodge a complaint against the Jerusalem Jews. He is in Rome simply to plead his own innocence.

And why has he invited them to his quarters?

**[20] “For this reason, therefore, I requested to see you and to speak with you, for I am wearing this chain for the sake of the hope of Israel.”**

He has something to say to them that is in their interest. With respect to all of this, Paul’s audience was completely in the dark.

#### The Jews’ response (vv. 21-22)

They told Paul, **[21]...“We have neither received letters from Judea concerning you, nor have any of the brethren come here and reported or spoken anything bad about you.**

All they know about this Christianity thing is **[21] “that it is spoken against everywhere” ...[22] “But we desire to hear from you what your views are...”**

They’re interested.

*The REAL meeting with the Jews of Rome (vv. 23-29)*

#### Paul’s presentation (v. 23)

**[23] When they had set a day for Paul, they came to him at his lodging in large numbers; and he was explaining to them by solemnly testifying about the kingdom of God and trying to persuade them concerning Jesus, from both the Law of Moses and from the Prophets, from morning until evening.**

Now, this is quite a scene.

Paul was a unique combination of a Pharisee who knew what we call the Old Testament backward and forward AND a Christ-follower who had fully integrated all that the Old Testament taught with Jesus’ words and works.

It would be hard to imagine what it would have been like to have sat there and listened as Paul put forward, say, the sacrificial system of ancient Israel and explained how it was all fulfilled in Jesus.

Or, how would you like to have heard Paul show how the prophets’ descriptions of the Messiah were fulfilled in Jesus, right down to His miracles, His parables, His death on the cross and resurrection from the dead?

It may have been that this time of presenting Jesus occurred on one day. Or, it may have taken place over a period of several meetings.

For Paul to have laid out all he would have loved to have told these guys about Jesus must have taken a while.

And after they heard it all, Luke gives us their response.

#### Response of the Jews (v. 24)

**[24] Some were being persuaded by the things spoken, but others would not believe.<sup>7</sup>**

Now that’s not too different from what I would have expected. In any audience, some are receptive; some aren’t. Some are persuaded, some aren’t persuaded.

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<sup>7</sup> In his commentary, Darrell Bock notes that the natives on the island of Malta were very receptive to Paul’s ministry, in contrast to the more lukewarm interest of the Jews, which led to Paul turning past the Jews to also reach out to the Gentiles. This theme is found throughout the book of Acts. Jewish rejection is countered by outreach to Gentiles who prove to be more open and receptive to the Gospel than the Jews were.

But Paul had expected more from this group. He had laid out enough convincing evidence that Jews who believed Scripture - the Law and the prophets - should have seen what he saw. They should have believed.

So, drawing on his own knowledge of Scripture, he knew just what to say to these who had listened, but not really.

Paul's parting shot (vv. 25-29)

THEIR REJECTION WAS FORETOLD (VV. 25-27)

**[25b]...“The Holy Spirit rightly spoke through Isaiah the prophet to your fathers,  
[26] saying,  
‘GO TO THIS PEOPLE AND SAY,  
“YOU WILL KEEP ON HEARING, BUT WILL NOT UNDERSTAND;  
AND YOU WILL KEEP ON SEEING, BUT WILL NOT PERCEIVE;  
[27] FOR THE HEART OF THIS PEOPLE HAS BECOME DULL,  
AND WITH THEIR EARS THEY SCARCELY HEAR,  
AND THEY HAVE CLOSED THEIR EYES;  
OTHERWISE THEY MIGHT SEE WITH THEIR EYES,  
AND HEAR WITH THEIR EARS,  
AND UNDERSTAND WITH THEIR HEART AND RETURN,  
AND I WOULD HEAL THEM.”<sup>8</sup>**

Those are words of judgment. In quoting Isaiah, Paul was calling them to account for their rejection of Jesus. And that shot was enough to send them heading for the exit.

As they were leaving, they heard his one final, parting shot.

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<sup>8</sup> Paul cites Isaiah 6:9-10 as a fitting explanation of the Jews response to the gospel. This quotation is even more meaningful because Jesus cited this same text in every one of the four Gospels to explain the Jews’ rejection of Him and His message. (Thanks to Bob Deffinbaugh for this insight.)

PAUL TURNS TO THE GENTILES, TOO (V. 28)

**[28] “Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will also listen.”**

So, Paul kept to his practice of going to the Jews first and they kept to their practice of rejecting his message. And he kept to his practice of turning to the more receptive audience of the Gentiles.

Now, finally, we come to the end of Luke’s book.

**Unhindered Gospel Ministry (vv. 30-31)**

**[30] And he stayed two full years in his own rented quarters and was welcoming all who came to him, [31] preaching the kingdom of God and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness, unhindered.**

*The Gospel goes forward*

Much has been made of Luke’s choice of a final word for the book. The last word - in the Greek text and hopefully in every translation - is **“unhindered.”**

Some scholars are unhappy with this ending. They think that **“unhindered”** is a lousy way to end the book.

There are suggestions that there was more to be said and that Luke either got interrupted and didn’t get around to writing that “more”, or that what he actually did write (let’s call it Acts 29) was lost.

I think **“unhindered”** is a fantastic way to end the book.

**“Unhindered”** describes Paul in Rome. He took the opportunity of his stay in Rome to write the letters of Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. He welcomed into his quarters anybody who wanted to hear about Jesus.

For so long he had been hindered in his attempts to spread the Gospel. He had been...

- ...threatened with death in Damascus and in Jerusalem;
- ...opposed in Iconium;
- ...stoned nearly to death in Lystra;
- ...beaten and jailed in Philippi;
- ...brought up on charges in Corinth;
- ...laughed at in Athens;
- ...targeted in a riot in Ephesus;
- ...attacked in Jerusalem three times;
- ...targeted by vigilantes;
- ...delayed for over two years in jail in Caesarea; and then
- ...shipwrecked and snake bit and accused of deity on Malta!

Wow. And now, he's "**unhindered**."<sup>9</sup>

It's a word of triumph and unquenchable optimism and forward movement. It looks ahead to the next chapter and envisions Acts 29, the chapter you and I are living out right now.

The story of the advance of the Gospel in the years following Acts 28 is a thrilling story. The apostles and the generations of believers that followed took the message east at least as far as India, north and west into central Asia and Europe, and south into Africa.

Our final view of Paul tells us of the final victory of the progress of the Gospel.

By ending with "**unhindered**", Acts ends on a very positive note. The word fires our imaginations.<sup>10</sup>

The Gospel is let loose and so is Paul. After all the hindrances and roadblocks he's faced, he can now serve Jesus freely and openly without hindrances. The Gospel will triumph as it spreads. Paul is unhindered and so are we. How inspiring!

But (and I hate to do this), a reality check is in order. Because we remember what Paul's situation was when Luke wrote that he was "**unhindered**."

*Paul's story; our story*

### Paul, the hindered

Paul was free to take the Gospel wherever he wanted - as long as he didn't leave his rented quarters. And he could share the Gospel with whomever he wanted to share it - as long as they came to him.

He had complete freedom to move wherever he wanted to move, just as long as the Praetorian Guard to whom he was chained agreed to walk with him across the room. And he could enjoy all the food and drink and creature comforts he needed, as long as those supporting him kept sending checks.

If Paul was "**unhindered**", he was the "*hindered*" "**unhindered**."

There were significant roadblocks in his path keeping him from living as he would have wanted to live. His circumstances kept him from serving Jesus as he would have wanted to serve Him.

Which brings us to 2017, and to us. We, too, face roadblocks and we, too, are hindered.

### You, the hindered

One of the wonderful things about serving as a pastor is that I get to hear stories. Your stories.

I will learn, over the course of a week or of a month about your new job and the exciting possibilities it brings.

<sup>9</sup> It is not likely that the charges against Paul were dropped due to the accusers not pressing them within a two-year time frame. The idea that this is what happened is based on an erroneous understanding of Roman law. More likely, Paul did testify before Caesar (see the angel's message while on board the ship; 27:23-24), was found not guilty, and was allowed to carry on with his life and ministry.

<sup>10</sup> Writing later from a much darker cell, Paul writes, [2 Timothy 2:9] *the word of God is not imprisoned*.

I'll hear about a spiritual breakthrough, a fresh repentance, or a new opportunity to serve. I get to hear about good stuff.

But I also hear about your financial setbacks. Or that your spouse or a child or a good friend is ill. Or that what you just heard from your doctor has confirmed your worst fears. Or that you've lost your job and there's not much opportunity on the horizon.

I got an email not long ago from someone who used to attend our church. He told me of daily suicidal thoughts, a dead-end series of jobs, and a family life that seems hopelessly broken.

If you are facing a roadblock like any of these, you'll find it hard to do what you want to do in life. And any of them could derail your efforts to serve Jesus. These are hindrances. And Paul would understand your hindrances.

But the Apostle Paul understood something else, too. And all of us who face hindrances can learn from this man to be among the *"hindered"* ***"unhindered."***

### We, the hindered unhindered

Luke, watching Paul write letters to churches while under house arrest, listening to him share Jesus with the soldiers who were chained to him, saw a small, middle-aged man with an enormous God.

That's what gave Luke the audacity to describe the very-hindered Paul as ***"unhindered."***

He saw a man who never lost sight of the compelling love of Jesus. A man who never forgot that:  
God is a rewarder of those who seek and serve Him;  
there is a life beyond this life more real than this one;  
he was a servant of the Creator; and  
the Gospel was the answer to the most basic need of every person everywhere.

So, no, Paul couldn't do all that he might want to do. And, yes, those chains did limit him. But, for Jesus' sake, he could still do something. And what he could do, he would do.

You and I are limited due to station of life, talents and abilities. None of us have unlimited time, energy, or money to do all that we would like to do. Relational pressures hinder us.

But, by God's goodness, we can do something. And by God's grace, what we can do, we will do.<sup>11</sup>

Over the years here, we have seen...  
...homeless men who are unable to give money do some beautiful landscaping.  
...people carrying loads of emotional pain rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep.  
...men and women who are frail become mighty in prayer.  
...people battling disease give testimony to God's grace and strengthen us all.  
...some who understand their own failure and sin share the good news of Jesus with abandon.  
...those who are already tired serve lovingly, shepherd children, deliver meals, make phone calls, practice hospitality.

There is something especially powerful about people who are hindered living as if they are not. They're not pretending. They are simply choosing, by God's grace, to live in light of eternity, and to listen for Jesus' ***"Well done!"***

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<sup>11</sup> Paul reported that his imprisonment in Rome had resulted in great progress for the Gospel, with most of the Praetorian Guards - the men to whom he was chained! - now having heard about Jesus. (Philippians 1:12-13)