

The Old Testament Background to Luke-Acts & The Pauline Epistles

I would like to begin with a short devotional before we get into the technicalities of this course. The Book of Acts ends with one significant and telling word that you will not find in your English translation. In the Greek text, the last word of the book of Acts is ‘unhindered.’ The whole verse says, “Boldly and without hindrance, he [Paul] preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 28:31). In the English phrase, it makes more sense for that adverb ‘without hindrance’ to be in the beginning of the sentence, but it is very significant that at the end of this wonderful progression of the ministry of the Word going out and breaking through all kinds of barriers, you have the triumphant last word ‘unhindered.’ This is after Stephen’s martyrdom, after much calamity, persecution, inner struggle, difficulty, and opposition. Even the custody of Paul is included. And yet the Word goes out unhindered.

Some people have argued that this word ‘unhindered’ is mainly a legal term, meaning that Paul was not hindered while under investigation, under legal custody. That is true, but the whole message of the book of Acts speaks of the unhindered spread of the gospel. The clear message of the book of Acts is that God’s work goes on, whether you are involved or not, whether you do or don’t. This most significant work of salvation is not dependent and contingent upon Paul, upon Peter, upon Stephen, upon you, or upon me. God’s Word is going to go out, and the only question is whether or not you going to be part of it. Am I going to be part of it, or am I going to “stay on the side and watch”? This is the question we are left with after reading the book of Acts. Where are you? Are you part of that work of God or not?

But the book of Acts also lifts the weight from our hearts in a wonderful way by showing us that we are not the doers and shakers. God is the one who moves his work along in an amazing way, despite overwhelming opposition. It is disheartening to see the kind of opposition that the Gospel is met with in the book of Acts. We know from our own lives, our own hearts, and our own dynamics – both internal and external – that there is all kind of opposition. Many Christians at this very moment are being persecuted. So, much has not changed. But we can praise God that another thing definitely has not changed, and that is that God is accomplishing his work. I can’t understand it all. I can’t explain it all. I don’t even understand all my personal challenges and difficulties, let alone why thousands of Christians in the Sudan are being persecuted at this very moment. I can’t explain it all, but the book of Acts conveys a wonderful confidence that God’s purposes are triumphant.

In this class we will be aligning our minds, our hearts, our purposes, and our desires to the purposes of God, with the prayer that somehow we would be found in the midst of God’s work. Wherever you are, whatever denomination you are involved with, whatever relations you have, whatever professional career you are pursuing, none of that is really significant. The significant point is whether you are involved, whether you are being used in that triumphant work of God that is definitely going to happen unhindered. So I would like to begin our course with prayer. Let us pray together.

Our heavenly Father, we thank you and praise you that in our weakness, we can have the privilege of joining together for this course. I pray that you would quiet our hearts and our minds. While we are here to learn much, we pray even more that you would soften our hearts and that you would give us a Spirit-led and Spirit-motivated devotion and dedication that would move us to witness to your glory, to your great work and to the fact that your purposes are going to be lived out and fulfilled according to your Word. I thank you for each person here and I pray that you would give us renewed strength,

renewed concentration, and that we would meet with you and delight in your words together. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

The required texts are *Luke, Historian and Theologian*, by I. Howard Marshall, and *Paul, Apostle of the Heart Set Free*, by F.F. Bruce. The Marshall reading is challenging, but you will see his great concern for the historical and theological dimension of Luke-Acts. Some things you will not agree with – I don't either – but it will be good for you to be challenged in this way. Remember that Marshall is a professor who has been very exposed to radical, critical scholarship that says Luke is basically useless as an historian. That is the context in which he works and argues, and he does a fine job.

We will be reading through the book of Acts and the Pauline epistles. You may use your favorite translation. I will try to give lead questions for each class, introductory questions that lead into part or the whole of the lecture. Increasingly in our culture we tend to think in fragmented bits and pieces, without much continuity or concern for context or history. When you watch TV for instance, the program is constantly interrupted by advertisements. By asking a lead question I want to help us think in context and think historically. The lead question for this class is, "Why is salvation necessary?" I will also ask summary questions at the end of class, challenging you to apply the content to your particular area of expertise, of concern, of question, and of learning. The lead question is supposed to get you started, and the summary question is supposed to lead you further.

We are spending much time in the Book of Acts initially, and that may be surprising for you because the title of this course is "The Life and Letters of Paul." I spend so much time in Acts purposefully, to say, "if you want to understand Paul you must understand Acts." I want you to look at Acts carefully and to see how the letters are based in the life of Paul and in the theological concerns of the early Messianic Church that are described in Acts. What is happening here?

We are trying to get a chronological feel for what is happening historically, but more than that we want to understand, "What are the concerns that Paul brings into his letters?" We want to understand the correlation between the beginnings of a church such as the one in Philippi and the events in the book of Acts. The little bits and pieces of historical information we get in Acts and the epistles, and the message that comes out, is significant. We will ask throughout this course, "what does it mean to us?" "How is it relevant?" "Are these just arbitrary letters to particular situations that no longer relate to us today?" I hope to be able to transfer them fairly well.

Adolf Schlatter, a German scholar from the turn of the last century, said that if you study carefully the historical and theological setting of a biblical book, the wall between you and that setting becomes thin, and the message speaks directly to you. Therefore, applying the lessons of the letters to the Corinthians will be easier when you see that the Corinthian's problems are so similar to our problems. We just have to get over the hump of understanding what those problems were. What does Paul mean when he speaks about the Colossians being tempted by proto-Gnostic philosophies in Colossae? What are those philosophies? Once you understand these issues, and see them in their context, Paul's letters hit home. When that barrier becomes thin through historical and theological study, you suddenly see that Scripture speaks rather directly.

Let us begin by reflecting on the question of the Old Testament background to Luke and Acts and the Pauline epistles. I have mentioned that we have the tendency to think ahistorically, as if these books were without historical context. I recently taught in a church and asked the question, "Why did Jesus call us to discipleship?" There was a long silence. Jesus called us to discipleship. That was his concern – "To make disciples." No one in the congregation I was addressing seemed to understand that this is

the fulfillment of a long anticipated and greatly needed concern of the Jewish people and of mankind – to be called into discipleship of the living God. That is exactly my concern here.

Thus, we do not study Luke, Acts, or the Pauline epistles as if they were like an oracle from Delphi, something that came out of nowhere and just happened. When we study Acts this way, we might say something like, “There is this outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and the Church talks about the message of Jesus Christ; it is wonderful and we have to be involved in that.” We would not be asking, “Why was that necessary? What precipitated this momentous development? What was behind it?” Thus, we first need to understand the biblical worldview and mindset behind these books before we ask the particulars of, “What does the Book of Acts, and the life and writings of the Apostle Paul, really accomplish?”

I would say there are four basic elements to a biblical worldview: to understand life in terms of creation, fall, redemption, and glorification. This exercise of thinking about things in life in terms of creation, fall, redemption, and glorification helps us in answering pressing questions that otherwise are left unanswered. As B. Pascal understood, there is something glorious about man and creation. And yet, there is something profoundly miserable about man and creation. On account of God’s work of redemption, there is hope to get from the misery to glory.

In Pascal’s *Pensées* he speaks about *la gloire*, the splendor of who we are and what we have surrounding us. Then he speaks about *la misère*, the misery of what we see when we look at a human heart, its fragility and corruption, and all that comes out of that. Then he speaks of the possibility and the hope that there would be some solution to the dilemma of the glory and the misery co-existing so horribly throughout the ages – and that solution comes in the form of salvation in Christ. This is a global question; we all want to understand reality. Scripture gives this wonderful four-step answer.

There is the good and perfect creation of God, and then there is the fall, a fracture. There is a great rift, a great breaking up of that order, when man exalts himself and disobeys the one God in order to create his own god-replacement. Man establishes either himself or objects to be his god. Then we see how there is a way of being saved out of this hopeless state. But the way out is not by self-effort, because the fracture, the break, has been so radical and so deep that we cannot get ourselves out or pull ourselves out by our own strength. But there is a way out, a way of salvation. Thus everything in this life has traits of glory, but is stained and marked by its dissociation from its original purpose – to give glory to God. But all of creation will one day be freed to again give glory to God in everything.

Economic structures, science, psychology, and anything under the sun can be seen through this grid of creation, fall, redemption, and glorification. It is amazing. But of course you will not have answers for everything. That would be impossible. But you do have an approach to the deep problems of human existence that gives hope. This does not deny the glory; nor does it deny the misery. That was one of Pascal’s great points. He was seeking a philosophy of life that does justice to both of those elements. Do not become an idealist and say there is no evil. Do not become an existentialist who is depressed about life because you see no glory, believing that glory is only an illusion, a figment of your imagination.

Much of philosophy, and many worldviews, fall into one of those extremes. They do justice to part of reality, either to the glory or to the misery, but not the whole. Thus we see the wonder of this biblical worldview. Into that context of the glory of creation and the misery of the fall comes the message of salvation, the incarnation of Christ. He is the only one who understands the purposes of God and can

communicate them, translate them into our human existence by living with us an exemplary life, and by wise teaching. And he calls us to salvation, giving his atoning life on behalf of the people who follow him. That is the larger, overall reason why salvation in the Book of Acts is so significant and so important.

Now God in his wisdom has established a memorial, a sign of salvation through choosing the people of Israel. There is a line of salvation that we can see by the calling of Abraham and by establishing an eternal covenant. You look at Israel and you see not a wonderful people, not a people that is great, not a people that merits great praise. No, you see reflected in that stubborn people, the grace, the mercy, the faithfulness, the majesty, and the greatness of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. You find God; you find the salvation of God. You find him who leads his people out of the dilemma of the misery and the glory in which our human existence finds itself without God. Thus, as we look at Israel, we look at God's intervention in history on behalf of mankind as a document of salvation. Within that there are prophetic utterances that speak of the coming final culmination of God's salvation of his people. The Exodus from Egypt anticipates a final salvation that goes much deeper than "simply being saved from slavery." The Exodus is a major, major event. But that future salvation, that liberation, is supposed to go even deeper than that. Therefore we have Old Testament predictions that speak about a coming ruler who rules eternally. 2 Samuel chapter seven contains one of the major messianic anticipations, where the rule of David is seen to not only extend to a few successors, but to an eternal kingdom on the throne of David, an eternal rule over that people with whom God covenants.

His salvation-plan awaits that ultimate involvement of God with man in such an intimate and deep sense that history had not seen prior to that. There are many Old Testament references to the anticipation of a messianic ruler, a ruler of God. God is the master and the ruler of mankind before the fall, and then he calls to himself a people. But then they say, "We would like to be like the other people. They have kings, so let's have some kings." God in his mercy gives the people of Israel a king, a second king, and a third king. But the desire of God is to be re-established as the only King, the real King of his people. That is the wonderful mystery that you have in the Gospels.

There arises a prophet who says, "Let me tell you about the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is like this, and like that, and like this. Let me give you some examples. That is how the kingdom of God is." Only slowly does it dawn on the hearers that the one who is speaking to them of the kingdom of God is the King himself. He says something surprising: "Guess how I am inaugurating that kingdom? I will give my life on behalf of the people. I will begin my rule by dying an atoning death." It is amazing how this salvation-history, this rule of God, unfolds. We see that anticipation of salvation already in 2 Samuel 7, in Psalm 2, and in other passages.

Thus, we are not surprised when we come to Luke 2:28. I want to read that passage to give you a connection to the Old Testament and its anticipation of salvation. Here Simeon says these hopefully familiar words: "Simeon took him" [the baby Jesus] "in his arms and praised God, saying . . ." Now, listen to this wise old prophet who echoes centuries of expectation and yearning and hope. He says,

Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,
you now dismiss your servant in peace.
For my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the sight of all people,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel.

He says this in anticipation of God's final visitation. Before you start reading the first word of the book of Acts, you need to understand this sense of yearning for the presence and the visitation of God to his

people. That is what really sparks this wonderful movement of the gospel going out in such an amazing way. That is why it succeeds, because God is behind it. There are centuries of waiting and anticipation.

How did the Jews anticipate God's intervention? It was not uniform. There was not just one way Jewish people were thinking about how God would finally visit his people. There were the apocalyptic Jews and apocalyptic expectation, which was, "you need to wait until God does it all. You cannot do anything. It will be God's involvement, and when he does, it will be the end of the world. Nothing will continue. God will come and end this. There will be a new heaven and a new earth." There were others who were nomistic. They would say, "The way we anticipate the visitation of God is by self-purification. God will not visit us unless we are pure. God will not visit us unless we keep his commandments." The Pharisees would be one such group. There were some groups in first century Palestine who said the Pharisees were not strict enough. These included the Essenes, who lived in communities. The Qumran community is likely one of those Essene groups that said, "The only way God will visit us is if we are much more radical than the average Jew in Jerusalem. The Temple has been desecrated; there are opportunists there. The hierarchy of the spiritual leadership in our country has become corrupt. We must separate ourselves from our people. We must pray; we must dedicate ourselves to keeping the laws. We must make very strict rules of who is allowed to come to our community, and as we purify ourselves we will be 'the preparer of the way of the Lord'." The Qumran community thus applied Isaiah 40:3 to itself, just as John the Baptist did to his ministry. For a time, then, there were "competitors" with John the Baptist as the "preparer of the way of the Lord." The Qumran community was saying, "We are also preparing the way of the Lord." Now, you know the rest of the story. You know which one of those truly prepared the way of the Lord.

The third group would be the Zealots. They were a group in Palestine who said, "God has given us muscles. God has given us arms. God has given us intellect. Why would he not use that to usher in his rule? We must be active; we must do something. Not sit on our hands like the apocalyptic Jews, or just keep the law like the Pharisees. We have to do something." There were some zealot groups and factions that had contact with Jesus, and Jesus responded, "Are we here to fight? Are we here to take up arms? What battle are we fighting here?" Jesus clearly disassociates himself from this militant activist group, the Zealots. The way the kingdom comes, the way salvation comes, is none of these three. John the Baptist had it right as the prophet of God who said, "Repent; turn around; get yourself ready; someone is coming after me who will baptize you with the Spirit." There were some things that John the Baptist said that could be understood in a nomistic sense: "Do works of righteousness. Do not any longer conduct yourself in an ungodly way." Yes, because John the Baptist pointed to the gospel.

Grace indeed produces good works. John the Baptist was pointing towards the Savior, and that was his great merit. That was his wonderful prophetic deed over and against the Qumran community who did not point towards the coming Messiah. That is what makes John the Baptist the great prophet, because he said, "There is someone coming – and when he is here, you will be baptized with the Spirit." They had come very close to the time of redemption, having experienced creation and the fall. The people of Israel were chosen by God as a memorial. Their expectation and specific anticipation of the Messiah at the time of Jesus, exemplified by John the Baptist's ministry, mark the final point of this salvation-historical line pointing towards the Messiah, the savior. As Jesus comes, we see that Jesus is the king over hearts and lives.

Jesus provides an analysis of the societal and human dilemma that cuts right to the center of the human heart. He will not get stuck in systems, in programs, in organizations. He will move to the real root of the evil. I once heard of a sociological analysis of poverty where part of the findings pointed out that if you simply provide external, systemic changes, you will not necessarily help the people. Their own

mentality has to change. I was fascinated to hear about this study, because that is what Jesus is saying. He is not only interested in social injustice. He is not only interested in economic problems that burden many societies. He knows that the “glory-and-the-misery” questions and challenges are only addressed by addressing the heart of the matter. Once there is liberty and overcoming of the powers of sin and self-centeredness, there is real hope for situations and systems to improve.

We now will move to the book of Acts, the conclusion of this introductory lecture. I should spend much more time on the ministry of Jesus as the one who speaks about the rule of God and turns out to be its ruler, its God-appointed King. Acts shows that the message of Jesus, now proclaimed by his disciples is part of the gospel. Do not think that the gospel ends with chapter 24 of Luke. The gospel ends with chapter 28 of Acts. If you ask me what the gospel is I will tell you it is the message of the rule of God. Jesus is its King, and it hits home in our heart. That is the totality of the gospel. You have to include “that it hits home in our heart” as part of the gospel. I come from a German tradition, and even after I became a Christian I believed for many years that if you understood something, you had it. Mistakenly I thought: If you grasp the message of Jesus and what he is teaching, if you know that it is true, you have finished the task.

There are others who say that if it works, you have it. If your life somehow works out okay, you have it. The gospel speaks about both: know the truth, know why you believe and see that it works in life. The gospel must be lived out. I think those who would be pragmatics, without asking for a theoretical undergirding, are in great danger because they will just go for something that works. There are many things that work in the short term that are not true. But those like myself, who only believe if they understand it and know it to be true, also need to be aware of the holistic nature of the gospel. There is something in the gospel that needs to impact the heart, and only then is the gospel fully preached. The gospel message, God’s way, says both: understand and live. Do not just live, do not just understand. Hold these two: think and live. That is a powerful message from God in Luke and Acts that says, “The way I bring salvation is to the whole person and I have created thoughtful people. I have created people with rational abilities and I have created people who need to live and act out and follow through with convictions that I built into their hearts.” That is Luke and Acts. That is the salvation that is being brought.

Let’s briefly look at Paul and then conclude this lecture. I believe Colossians 3:16-17 is a very eloquent summary of Paul’s concerns. Now, obviously it is much more complex than this, but there is a fascinating summary in Colossian 3:16-17 of what Paul is concerned about as he preaches the gospel of Christ. He says, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” “In the name of Jesus” does not mean that you add to your prayers or your deeds, “I do this in the name of Jesus.” “In the name of Jesus” means “for his sake”—“I am being faithful in my daily duties out of faithfulness to my Lord. I am being faithful in a tense, difficult situation, and I will not move out of it, because of faithfulness to my Lord. I live and think connected to my Lord. That is how I operate. That is how I manage my life.” If you are anything like me, you will find yourself failing in this over and over again because the misery of the fall is still operating in you. Our natural disposition is to deny God at every turn – to deny God in our thinking, to deny God in our plans, to deny God in our wishes, and to deny God in our circumstances and situations. That is one purpose that Paul has for writing the letters to the Corinthians, to pick them up where they are. He also writes to the Galatians, the Philippians, and the Colossians where they are, to lead them to understand what it means to think in a God-centered way.

Growth in Christ requires much. Paul understands where the individuals and the various churches are. That is what we are trying to do this semester. We want to understand what the Philippians and the Colossians are all about, what their problems are. Then hopefully we will say, “It is amazing. It hits home. This is similar to where I am in my church situation, in my life and in what I have experienced in the past, or relevant to those I am trying to help.” I believe this is the purpose of the epistles. Showing how the reality of the supremacy of Christ hits every area of life. The epistles do not cover all the bases, but they do cover an amazing array and a very colorful selection of situations and circumstances that we may find ourselves in, in our churches and our personal lives.

That, briefly, is the answer to the questions of, “Why is salvation necessary?” and, “What is the Old Testament context for Acts and the Pauline epistles?” That is what I mean by looking at Acts and the Pauline Epistles “in context”, namely in literary context but also in biblical-historical context – we need to see the direction and purpose of God’s work. We can take great comfort in the fact that this direction that God has established in history will not stop at this point just because we have some economic troubles or traumatic situations in our family or church situation. Nothing will stop God’s mission. It has been anticipated so long, and it will surely “hit home” and reach its final goal, unhindered. You cannot turn it any other way. Of course, the mercy of God is so great that he still consoles us in our particular challenges. I do not mean to set these great purposes of God against the individual traumatic and difficult situations that we find ourselves in. But I think that before we encounter some of our major problems in life, it is good to see how God is directing all things. It is good to know this before we get troubled and absorbed in the circumstances of our lives that sometimes bring us to the brink of giving up hope. I think it is good that we spent this time reflecting on the purposes and works of God and reminding ourselves of his mission so that we may be able to stand in times of trial and tribulation and stay focused. Trauma and difficulty in life may reduce us to the problem before us and we may lose sight of God’s plan. Thus it is good for us to train ourselves and encourage and teach each other to know what God is doing in this bigger picture. Then we can seek to align our own particular lives to the purposes of God.