



## LIFE MEETS LIMITS

*Jeff Peabody  
New Day Church  
Federal Way, WA  
August 24th, 2008*

Somewhere underground in Switzerland right now, scientists are attempting to conduct the world's largest science experiment ever. Have you heard about this? It's true. More scientists from around the world, more money and more space have been devoted to this than to any other experiment in all of time. They've built something they call a particle accelerator, and they're trying to recreate on a miniature scale the kind of conditions they think existed right after the Big Bang. In a nutshell, the theory suggests that way back when there was this great concentration of pure energy that exploded to form all the matter in the universe. Interestingly, it was a French Catholic priest and physicist by the name of Georges Lemaitre who came up with the theory, and Einstein originally rejected it because he thought it sounded too close to the Christian idea of creation.

The theory goes on to suggest that because everything started with a bang, the universe is still expanding outwards from that explosion, with all the galaxies still rushing away from each other at high speeds.

Now regardless of how well the theory does or doesn't explain the beginning of the universe, it's a great analogy for how Christianity began. The book of Acts has been all about the Big Bang. You have the Holy Spirit being like some primeval fireball, pure energy as the source of everything in the church. And then you have the church always expanding outwards from that time forward.

You may remember back in May when we started this study of Acts, we said the theme of this book was that the gospel was universal. Jesus had told his disciples they would be witnesses first in Jerusalem, then Judea then Samaria, then to the end of the earth, that ever widening circle. And that's exactly what happened. After the Holy Spirit ignited that first group of disciples, everything has been rushing outward and expanding.

The book of Acts ends with Paul reaching Rome, a symbolic way to say that the good news had now gone everywhere. The old saying "all roads lead to Rome" could work equally well backwards – roads from Rome went everywhere. For the good news to reach that city was the same as saying it has achieved a universal status, because Rome represented the hub of civilization.

We're skipping over a chunk of Paul's travels, but not because they're uninteresting. Go back and read the last several chapters of Acts sometimes and you'll see they read like a

great adventure novel. There's so much in there you don't want to miss. Shipwrecks, snakes, daring escapes, dramatic rescues. We could spend a year in this book. But this morning I'd like to wrap up this study by jumping to the last chapter and seeing how it all ends.

### **Acts 28:14-31**

*And so we came to Rome. The brothers there had heard that we were coming, and they traveled as far as the Forum of Appius and the Three Taverns to meet us. At the sight of these men Paul thanked God and was encouraged. When we got to Rome, Paul was allowed to live by himself, with a soldier to guard him.*

*Three days later he called together the leaders of the Jews. When they had assembled, Paul said to them: "My brothers, although I have done nothing against our people or against the customs of our ancestors, I was arrested in Jerusalem and handed over to the Romans. They examined me and wanted to release me, because I was not guilty of any crime deserving death. But when the Jews objected, I was compelled to appeal to Caesar—not that I had any charge to bring against my own people. For this reason I have asked to see you and talk with you. It is because of the hope of Israel that I am bound with this chain."*

*They replied, "We have not received any letters from Judea concerning you, and none of the brothers who have come from there has reported or said anything bad about you. But we want to hear what your views are, for we know that people everywhere are talking against this sect."*

*They arranged to meet Paul on a certain day, and came in even larger numbers to the place where he was staying. From morning till evening he explained and declared to them the kingdom of God and tried to convince them about Jesus from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets. Some were convinced by what he said, but others would not believe. They disagreed among themselves and began to leave after Paul had made this final statement: "The Holy Spirit spoke the truth to your forefathers when he said through Isaiah the prophet:*

*"Go to this people and say,  
"You will be ever hearing but never understanding;  
you will be ever seeing but never perceiving."  
For this people's heart has become calloused;  
they hardly hear with their ears,  
and they have closed their eyes.  
Otherwise they might see with their eyes,  
hear with their ears,  
understand with their hearts  
and turn, and I would heal them.'*

*"Therefore I want you to know that God's salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen!"*

*For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ.*

Ever since we first got married, Karin and I have had kind of a strange way of reading books together. We will sit side by side on the couch and read the same one at the same time. It sounds all cute and romantic, but it's not always what it's cracked up to be. The older I get the sooner I get a crick in my neck from tilting in to see the pages. And Karin reads much faster than me, so she ends up having to wait for me to get done. Sometimes she can get up, answer the phone, throw in a load of laundry and put the kids to bed and I'll still have a paragraph to go. I like to think that I'm reading for comprehension.

This summer we read a new book that was a detective novel. The story was a pretty good page turner, but when we got to the end, it just fizzled. It was like the author didn't know how to get out of it. The ending wasn't satisfying at all.

Have you ever felt that way after a book or a movie? Sometimes the way things wrap up can leave you wishing for something more. And that's how the book of Acts can feel at the close -- unsatisfying. After all the drama we've seen, we're left with Paul under house arrest in his rental condo. There's no resolution. Will he get killed? Will he be released? It seems very open ended.

Historians estimate that Paul was executed in around AD 62. Acts was written after Paul had died, so Luke had to have known what happened to him. Why not give us the end of the story for some closure?

I think the reason is very simple: Luke isn't telling the story of Paul. This is the story of the gospel reaching the world. Ending with Paul's martyrdom would only serve to make us forget that. This must have taken a great deal of self control on Luke's part, because he was good friends with Paul. But he in no way wanted to make Paul's death compete with Christ's for our attention.

Paul seemed to have a very clear understanding of that. When he was travelling around, he would make comments like this:

**Acts 20:24**

*I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me -- the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace.*

On Tuesday of this past week, American runner Lolo Jones was the favorite by a long shot in the 100 meter hurdles. But when the race came, she clipped the second to last hurdle with her foot, which caused her to stumble and lose the race. Another American, Dawn Harper, surprised everyone and took the gold.

It was a huge disappointment for Jones, who had been waiting for that one moment since the Athens Olympics. But in an interview afterwards she sat next to Dawn and said, “This isn’t about me. It’s about the USA being on the podium. That’s what matters.”

Paul couldn’t have cared less if Luke told all the details of his ministry. He wanted the gospel to be on the podium. That was what mattered.

I think there’s another good reason Luke left Acts feeling so open-ended. Not only does the spread of the gospel not end with Paul’s death – it doesn’t actually end with its arrival in Rome, either. This is the never ending story. Luke leaves off, we begin, because we are now part of the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit.

But like Paul, you and I are not the central characters. The story is the story. That’s a tough one to remember, because we’d really like to be the stars in our own production. We want it to be about us or our church or our efforts. But it’s about Jesus. He’s the center. Not New Day. Not me. Not you.

Another somewhat striking feature of this end of Acts is that Paul is not miraculously set free. We’ve had two prison escapes in Acts, plus he has averted several death threats. We’ve talked about the theme of freedom a lot through the book of Acts, and we’ve said that God wants to set us free.

I stand by that truth. God does want us free. But his idea of freedom and our idea of freedom are not always the same. Paul is most definitely NOT free at the end of Acts. He’s living under actual physical restrictions and limitations. So we’re forced to ask ourselves another question: What do we do when God doesn’t break us out of our prisons? When he doesn’t change our conditions, when life doesn’t seem to go any better? Faith in God doesn’t make problems disappear, so how do we live with them?

We find some clues about how Paul did it in the very last sentences of Acts.

**When there’s no getting out...**

**Look for what’s coming in.**

If there had been a frequent flyer program back in the first century, Paul would have accumulated enough miles to fly for free anywhere in the world. He was on the road for Christ for years. Preaching for Paul was synonymous with travelling. He saw himself as one who was sent to the nations.

Now, he suddenly finds himself stuck in one place. And it wasn’t just for a few weeks: Luke says it was two full years of confinement. That had to be hard for him. The Germans have a word “fernweh” which means “an ache for the distance”, and I’m sure Paul felt that keenly as he chatted up the guard outside his door.

He could have sat and stewed. “God – you called me to go. I’m an apostle, and that means someone who’s sent – not someone who stays. There are lots of places I still haven’t gone. Wasn’t it you who gave me the idea of going to Spain? Why am I here?”

Have you ever asked God that question? Lord – why did you put me HERE? Why am I still in this mess? Don’t you have more in mind for me?

Paul may have felt that way, but if he did, he sure didn’t act that way. Look what Luke says:

*For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him.*

Paul the preacher couldn’t get out to the highways and byways anymore. But God started bringing people to him. And Paul saw that this was more than just visiting hours in his prison. This was an opportunity to get his message outside the walls without ever leaving the grounds

The verse says Paul “welcomed” all who came to see him. The Greek word for welcome there means to give somebody else access to yourself, to open yourself up. Paul was open to anybody God would bring his way. He gave God access to his unique situation, and was open to what that situation would allow him to do. Paul didn’t waste time complaining about what he COULDN’T do. He didn’t say, “This is not what my ministry is supposed to look like.” He just opened himself up to what God had for him within those limitations.

At the board meeting this week, Tom Parks was sharing about his sister Liz. Liz had just been accepted to a Master’s Degree program at SPU for this fall when she got the news that she had cancer. Tom’s other sister, Donna, had just been through it herself, so the family all knew how horrible and devastating the disease could be. Plus the timing seemed so bad – just before Liz was getting ready to fulfill this dream of going back to school. There was any number of reasons why she would be justified in complaining about being sick.

But Liz saw it differently. As soon as she heard she had cancer, she accepted the fact that this was in her life and had a peace that God would bring her through it. She could actually think of it as a gift. Because the degree program that she’s starting next month is in counseling people going through an illness. In her view, this was all part of God’s preparation to make her a better counselor. Rather than see it as simply bad news and a limitation on her life, she was open to what God could teach her through that limitation.

Here’s another example. When Amy Carmichael was a little girl, she desperately wanted to have blue eyes instead of brown. Her mother had taught her that Jesus answers our prayers, so she prayed for blue eyes at night. When she woke up and didn’t have them, it made her question God. Why wouldn’t he change her eye color for her?

When she grew up, she became a missionary and went to India. She went with the intention of being an evangelist, speaking to people about Jesus as much as she could. But there were all these young girls who had been sold by their families to be child prostitutes in the temple, and her heart was torn and tugged toward them. At first she saw these girls as a limitation – pulling her away from her missionary tasks. But then God began to show her they were a gift, because that was where he wanted her to get involved. So she started rescuing more and more girls from this dark, dark place. She would have to go undercover as an Indian woman, darkening her skin with coffee. And it was at that point that she realized why God had given her brown eyes. Blue eyes would have been a dead giveaway that she was a foreigner.

What is the unique limit in your life? Is it in your circumstances – your family of origin, a hard marriage, a tough job, a lack of money? Maybe it's even more personal, a limit in the way you yourself are wired, talents you wish you have but don't, expectations you've put on yourself that you can't seem to fulfill. Maybe, just maybe, the restrictions and limits God has allowed in your life are there as gifts and opportunities. Are you open, welcoming whatever and whoever God brings into your world through that limitation?

Pete Scazzero writes, "Maturity in life is when someone is living joyfully within their God-given limits."

That is so cutting against the grain. We desperately need to hear this truth today when we are in a society that is bombarded with expectations. We all think we deserve more or we should be achieving more. Limits are viewed as something to be knocked down – not welcomed. Paul was a walking demonstration of living joyfully within his God-given limits as he gladly received whoever came his way in his confinement.

Part of the secret that enabled him to do that was where he placed his attention. His life reminds us that when there's no getting out,

### **Keep the focus up.**

Here's what Paul was doing while in that Roman prison:

*Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ.*

When you hear about innocent people doing jail time, the stories often come out about how they kept fighting the system to get their sentence overturned, looking for that big appeal that will get them out. The quest for freedom consumes them while they're incarcerated.

That's what I would be concerned with. Do whatever it takes – just get me out. But Paul had a different agenda. Instead of obsessing over his own problems, he chose to focus on two things: The kingdom of God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

When England was in her heyday during under Queen Victoria, people would comment that the sun never set on the British Empire, because they had territory under their control all around the world, and the sun was always coming up somewhere.

Paul was thinking about God's empire, his kingdom. That means God's territory and everywhere his rule was taking effect. Not in political terms, but in spiritual terms. Christ's cross was like a flag planted in the ground claiming the world for God. Satan might try to hold out and pretend he's still in charge, but God's kingdom is advancing and expanding, and Paul was intent on bringing more and more territory under God's control.

That included his own life. So for Paul, the Roman authorities who were holding him didn't have ultimate authority. He believed in the kingdom of God to the point where he could see his circumstances as being under God's rule rather than Nero's. And his surroundings could no longer imprison him.

His location couldn't take away his freedom. His chains couldn't take away his freedom. The guards couldn't take away his freedom. Luke says he preached boldly and without hindrance from inside his prison because he saw himself as a citizen of a different kingdom where he was always and forever free.

Even more, if Paul really believed God was in charge, that he was living in God's kingdom, then he was willing to surrender his own authority over his circumstances. Are we willing to trust God with the limits in our lives, or are we fighting to change them on our own?

Beth Moore talks about this from her own experience. She said, "I finally had to turn over some of the hurts of my childhood to God's sovereign authority because I realized they would consume me like a cancer. When at last I allowed Him to govern everything about my past, not only did the Prince give me His peace, but he actually brought good from something horrible and unfair. If you have not yet bowed the knee to God's authority over areas of your past, my friend, something is holding you captive."

We're also told that Paul's focus was on Jesus Christ. You can think about God's kingdom in general terms, but Jesus puts it in personal perspective. If you spend any time meditating on Christ at all, you will inevitably begin thinking about his suffering and death. There's no way around it. And the more we try to take in the pain and agony he endured, the more perspective we'll have on our own problems.

Talk about limitations. Here's the eternal Son of God willingly dying. Here's the Almighty One, the shield, letting himself be wounded. Here's the most powerful being in the universe withholding all his power. Philippians tells us he emptied himself. He became the king of living with limits.

These two great truths – the reality of God’s kingdom and the life and death of Christ – were Paul’s secret weapons in finding joy and contentment regardless of his situation.

When I was in elementary school, my dad went through a period of really deep frustration with our church. At that time, my dad wasn’t employed as a preacher. He was working for the state. But he was in church leadership, teaching classes, serving on the board. And it was something he was very passionate about. Well the church hired a new pastor, a pastor who had zero interest in my dad’s ideas, or the ideas of the rest of the board, for that matter. He felt threatened by them, started rumors about them and essentially turned my dad into an outsider. My mom and dad didn’t feel like leaving the church would be the right choice, but there was no room for him to be involved or do any of the ministries he loved. Dad said it felt like he was in a box with no doors, just four solid walls that wouldn’t budge. And as he thought about that box, he said it felt like God was telling him, “When you’re surrounded by walls, maybe you should lie down and just look up.”

So that’s what he did. Instead of fighting, he focused his attention on God, waiting on him to provide the answers. He didn’t start a campaign to remove the pastor. He didn’t look for a way to sabotage him. He just looked to God to be his strength and get him out. And over time, that’s just what God did. That pastor left and a new pastor came who encouraged my dad and literally changed the direction of his life. But it only happened after my dad gave up his own attempts to find a way out and instead put his focus on the Lord.

Are you living like God has control of your situation? Is your focus on Jesus or the limits you’re up against? How will it look different if you shift your attention to him? Paul would later put it this way:

**Colossians 3:2**

*Don't shuffle along, eyes to the ground, absorbed with the things right in front of you. Look up, and be alert to what is going on around Christ — that's where the action is. See things from his perspective.*

When there’s no getting out, look for what’s coming in, keep the focus up

**Sanctify the situation.**

In the beginning of the movie, Nacho Libre, you see this sequence of scenes where a chubby little hand reaches in and first snatches a fringe of fabric, then a couple red flowers, then a string of beads. It seems like a random, unconnected set of objects. But the young boy Nacho is “repurposing” all those pieces for something new: his wrestling costume.

That’s what we do when we sanctify something for God. We take the different pieces of our lives that seem random and disconnected and we repurpose them for something else.

We set them apart for God. We can even do that with our limiting circumstances, taking what seems pointless and declaring that it now belongs to God.

When you are in despair in your situation, you waste away. You have no energy for anything. But we are people of hope, and like we said last week, even in our darkest hours God is with us. We can take that time in the dark and give it to God to do what he wants to do with it.

Again, Paul did that so well. Acts only gives us a sentence, but we know more about what Paul was doing then. We know that he chose to spend hours and hours in prayer. Prayer not for himself, but for all the churches he had been part of.

How do we know he did that? Because Paul also did something else while he was in that Roman prison: He wrote. During that period in jail, Paul wrote many of the letters that are now part of our Bible. Ephesians. Colossians. Philippians. I Timothy. Titus.

God had told Paul, "I want you in Rome." Paul assumed that meant to preach there, because that's what he did. But I believe God wanted Paul in Rome to slow him down long enough to write some of the most important documents in all of history. Because if Paul had remained free, he most likely would have poured his energies primarily into his preaching. And now, some 2000 years later, it is those letters that have had a far more lasting impact on the church than any of the preaching that seemed so urgent and pressing for Paul back in Acts. And even though it happened in a totally different way, God honored Paul's desire to reach the world with the gospel. God knew how to satisfy Paul's heart better than he knew himself, and he knows better how to satisfy your heart than you know yourself.

What is it that feels limiting to you today? What frustrates you? What makes you feel trapped or boxed in? Is it time to lie down and look up?

God is in charge. His kingdom is real. When we give him our prisons, when we steal bits of our lives and repurpose them for him, he can fill us up with joy and give us a freedom beyond the walls. Even when the walls don't come tumbling down.

It's easy to think in general about some of these concepts, but I'd like you to think for a moment this morning and ask yourself,

Do I know my limits?

What are the things in my life that feel restrictive? What frustrates me more than anything? Something about myself? Something about my circumstances? What has me feeling boxed in?

I've talked before about Joni Eareckson Tada, the woman who was injured in a diving accident when she was 16, and who has been a quadriplegic in a wheel chair for 40 years

now. She was recently interviewed by the BBC about living with her physical limitations. She said this to them, which I thought was powerful:

My wheelchair's not my cross to bear daily. My cross to bear is my attitude about my wheelchair sometimes - the grumbling, the disputings, the murmurings, the complainings, the wishful thinking - I'd really rather be on my feet. I'm not gonna let this disability scream for my undivided attention. I'm gonna think about somebody else with their needs, and I'm gonna trust God that He's got a plan and a purpose, and I'm gonna move forward in His grace.

What in your life has been screaming for your undivided attention? Once you've identified it, the next question is this:

Am I ready to lie down and look up?

To give up Am I ready to surrender to Christ on this one, to humble myself and accept this limitation? Maybe God has put it there for a reason as a gift. Maybe it's for my protection. Maybe it's for an opportunity to impact someone. I may not ever even know why he allowed it, but am I willing to bend the knee and accept it from his hand, trusting the God who said all things work together for the good of those who love him?