

“For In God We Live and Move and Have Our Being” (Acts 17:28): “Human Flourishing” According to the Speeches of Paul in the Acts of the Apostles

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Abstract

This article examines instances and examples of human flourishing in Paul's speeches as they appear in the second half of the Book of Acts. After an initial analysis of the relationship between suffering and human flourishing in the portrayal of Paul in Acts and his speeches from this perspective, the article argues that human flourishing is closely related to people aligning themselves with God the creator and worship him appropriately, with his recent salvific activities in Jesus of Nazareth, crucified, resurrected and exalted, and believe in him, and with the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. People are to live according to these realities. This fulfilment of the promises and purposes of God is the new reality Paul came to understand, accept and align himself with, which he faithfully proclaimed and in which he came to flourish as Christ's emissary. Human flourishing is thus closely linked to discipleship and to faithful fulfilment of one's calling, empowered and guided by the Spirit, in fellowship with others and with the prospect of divine reward. Living faithfully and joyfully in harmony with this reality is essential for human flourishing. In this way, the results add an important Trinitarian perspective to the quest for human flourishing.

1. Introduction

Jonathan Pennington (2015:1) suggests that the idea or theme of human flourishing, broadly understood, is

one meta-theme or meta-concept that appears with remarkable tenacity and consistency across times and worldviews. This concept has staying power and universal voice because it addresses what is most basic and innate to all of humanity, despite the diversity of race, culture, and values. It is a concept that proves to be the motivating force and end goal of all that humans do and think.

This is the case because, as Pennington (2015: 1–2) claims,

Human flourishing alone is the idea that encompasses all human activity and goals because there is nothing so natural and inescapable as the desire to live, and to live in peace, security, love, health, and happiness. These are not merely cultural values or the desire of a certain people

or time period. The desire for human flourishing motivates everything humans do ... All human behaviour, when analysed deeply enough, will be found to be motivated by the desire for life and flourishing, individually and corporately.

Pennington (2015) and others have brought this concept to Christianity (see, for instance, Volf 2013 and Charry 2010) and also read the Bible afresh from this perspective (see the collection of essays edited by Strawn 2012). To bring such concepts to the Bible, and to assess them in view of the Bible, comes naturally to evangelical Christianity, as it understands itself as a movement in which the Bible plays (and is to play) a prominent role. To read the Bible as a source of guidance on human flourishing might not come to mind as quickly, perhaps due to the understandable unease with the widespread, much-reduced, “gospel” of health and wealth, or other emphases which developed in the history of doctrine (for an analysis, see Charry 2010). However, to search in the Bible for examples of people who buoyantly lived their lives before God, and in alignment with his word and purposes, or for instructions for a blessed, God-pleasing life which at the same time ensures human flourishing, is a fully legitimate and deeply evangelical concern.

The current article undertakes this quest and takes it to a biblical book which has been neglected in this regard. The following examination of human flourishing, according to Paul’s speeches as they appear in the second half of the Book of Acts, supplements Pennington’s (2015:5–15) survey of biblical key terms for human flourishing and takes Joel B. Green’s (2020: 233–247) study of happiness in Luke’s Gospel further, to add to the biblical explorations of the theme in Strawn (2012).

When thinking about human flourishing in the Bible, Paul may not be the first person who comes to mind. One might rather think of King Solomon in all his proverbial splendour (Lk 12:27) or turn to the Beatitudes of Jesus. Does he not describe (and prescribe at the same time) what such flourishing looks like in view of the kingdom of God? When thinking of Paul, the declaration in Acts 9:16, “For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name”, indicates an existence which, at first glance, is at odds with human flourishing, as it is commonly understood. In addition, there is the impact of Paul’s own long list of various sufferings in 2Corinthians 11:23–33, which serves to authenticate his apostolic ministry, and other assertions of Paul regarding his own suffering and the suffering of Christ-followers in general.¹

Indeed, the Book of Acts reports a number of instances of Paul’s suffering.²

Apparently, this suffering was in particular need of explanation. It is, however, less prominent in his biography when put into perspective: although it is impossible to give precise dates, from Paul's conversion/calling to his imprisonment in Rome (Ac 28:31 is most probably to be dated to the year AD 61 or 62), Acts covers, after all, about 25-30 years of his life and there was much more to his life, as we will see. Our focus here is on Paul's speeches, as recorded in Acts, before different audiences, and on the clues which they provide to human flourishing.³ We do so in order to comprehend how Paul understood (or might have understood) the essential ingredients of such an existence. This quest can assist in seeing which aspects of human flourishing have been neglected, lead us beyond our culturally conditioned notions of human flourishing, or cast some of our notions in a different light.

2. Paul's Own Biography: Suffering and Human Flourishing

Before we look at Paul's speeches, we briefly look at the portrayal of Paul's life in Acts.⁴ Portraying Paul's life as an example of human flourishing, readily to be imitated by all other believers, is not the main purpose of Luke-Acts. Rather, Luke briefly sketches Paul's pre-Christian past, his calling/conversion and ensuing faithful ministry over many years, including all the suffering it involved and how Paul set out "to finish his course and the ministry that he received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God" (Ac 20:24). Luke did so in order to provide an apology for Paul's disputed ministry and to provide much-needed certainty to his readers, as he declares in the preface to Luke-Acts (Lk 1:4).

We keep this summary relatively short as, obviously, what people consider human flourishing, depends on their personality, faith, value system, culture, and social and material circumstances, to name but a few of the factors involved (for the cultural conditioning of what people might consider happiness/human flourishing, see the instructive studies discussed by Green 2020: 234–235; for a fuller discussion, see Sahlin 1995). Any assessment from our different perspectives must therefore remain tentative.⁵

In addition to Paul's faithful fulfilment of his calling, despite the hardships and suffering which this involved, Luke also offers other perspectives which suggest that Paul's life was a "good life" from a spiritual perspective. Although initially an ardent persecutor of Christ and his followers, Paul was not judged by God (as, for instance, King Herod was, see Ac 12:23), but received grace, was forgiven and restored by God/Jesus. Paul was not only pardoned but received the opportunity to serve the Christ he had

persecuted. During his ensuing ministry, Paul experienced the nearness, comfort, help, guidance and affirmation of the Holy Spirit and of Jesus himself, amidst all turmoil. In his ministry, Paul could see God at work to affirm his message and efforts through astonishing miracles, whether they were wrought by God or by Paul himself.

Also, on a human level, Paul’s life contained several elements which many today would consider to be important aspects of human flourishing. Paul was accepted by the believers in Damascus (despite his problematic past), found Christian fellowship, and attracted adherents there who saved his life by helping him to escape. Barnabas was ready to trust him and introduce him to the community in Jerusalem. Paul’s fellow believers cared for him, were concerned about his safety, and ushered him off. There and later on in Antioch, Paul experienced fellowship and co-operation with others (Barnabas) and was trusted by others. In his missionary enterprise, others joined Paul as his co-workers and travel companions. He received hospitality on many occasions. Although there were trials and set-backs, Paul’s witness to Jesus was accepted eagerly by many people, Jews and non-Jews alike (Ac 13:42–44). Paul could see the fruits of his endeavours and start Christ-following congregations in major cities in the ancient Eastern Mediterranean world, which were to continue his mission in their vicinities. Other Christ-followers took an interest in what Paul was doing. He received some recognition for his achievements from the believers in Antioch and Jerusalem (although some Jewish Christ-followers remained suspicious of him). Paul had faithful friends during his long imprisonment who cared for him, including on his journey to Rome as a prisoner.⁶ On several occasions, all kind of people helped Paul when in need – from the Asiarchs of Ephesus, to relatives in Jerusalem, to friends in Sidon, to a Roman officer who wished to save his life, to the barbarous islanders on Malta who met Paul’s physical needs. While often hindered by circumstances (various forms of resistance) or other “interference” (16:6–7; see also 27:9–11, 21), and later on for several years as a Roman prisoner, Paul had the privilege of experiencing a certain measure of self-efficacy, often associated today with human flourishing.

In addition, Paul enjoyed many of the prerequisites of human flourishing. He had the privilege of receiving a comprehensive Jewish education, including excellent knowledge of the Scriptures and early Jewish sources as well as familiarity with their interpretation, and also some knowledge of the Hellenistic cultural tradition. Paul knew how to use these assets in his ministry (see the many quotations) and for receiving guidance as to

his own course of action. He could communicate in at least two languages (Greek and Aramaic; and he had knowledge of ancient Hebrew). Paul had skills with which he could earn a living whenever it became necessary. It also seems that he was not poor, but had access to considerable financial means. Since his birth Paul was a Roman citizen (and a citizen of Tarsus, Ac 21:39), with all the privileges which this implied and which he knew to employ wisely. In his personality, Paul displayed zeal and determination and was not one to be discouraged or dismayed easily. Last but not least, he must have been in a fairly robust physical condition.

After these reflections on the portrayal of Paul's life in Acts, we now survey his speeches to find clues to human flourishing.⁷ How do these speeches reflect on human existence in general, and on the life of Christ-followers? What clues do they provide to human flourishing? Unsurprisingly these speeches focus on human flourishing due to, and before, God.⁸

3. Addressing Jewish Audiences

Acts contains one major speech of Paul to his fellow non-Christ-believing Jews, and a number of summary reports of his message and ministry in Jewish contexts (preaching Jesus as God's Messiah in fulfilment of Scripture in various synagogues). Here the focus is on this speech, reported in Acts 13:16–41. Paul begins with a summary of the history of Israel and focuses on God's faithfulness. God chose, multiplied and liberated Israel (17), patiently put up with this people in the wilderness (18), and gave them Canaan as an inheritance (19). Later, God provided leaders (20, the judges, the prophet Samuel, King Saul), removed Saul and elevated David (22). From David's offspring God brought to Israel as saviour Jesus, as he had promised (23). Through the ministry of John, the Baptist, God prepared the people for this saviour (24–25). God sent this message of salvation to his people (26). Although the people rejected Jesus, God raised him from the dead, affirmed him, and instituted witnesses to this key event (27–31). In all of this, God fulfilled his promises (32–35). Through the risen Jesus, forgiveness is possible and proclaimed (38); liberation is available to all: "By him, everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses" (39). In all of this, God is doing a marvellous work in the present time of fulfilment (see Lk 1:1), which must be recognised, not rejected (41).⁹

While far from a description of human flourishing, there are several clues as to what such flourishing would have looked like for Paul: due to God's faithfulness to his promises and many provisions, humans can flourish. Being able to rely on these promises and God's provision will

give them security and space to live in. Human flourishing depends on God’s manifold provisions. He is the one who can undo human mistakes. God’s salvation – that is, forgiveness of sins and liberation – is crucial for human flourishing. Life is good because God’s reliable promises of old have been fulfilled in Jesus, the Christ. The privilege of living in the age of the fulfilment of divine promises, and recognising and acknowledging what God is doing in the present time and living accordingly, are crucial ingredients for human flourishing.

4. Addressing Non-Jews

Acts contains only two relatively short speeches of Paul before non-Jewish audiences (Ac 14:14–17; 17:22–32).¹⁰ What clues to human flourishing do they provide?

Before the crowds of Lystra, ready to venerate Paul and Barnabas after their impressive healing miracle, the missionaries insist that they bring the good news, that these polytheists should turn from their vain idols and deities, towards the living God, “who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them” (Ac 14:15). While in the past, he allowed the nations to walk in their own ways (14:16), God nevertheless did not leave himself without witness to his existence and nature. He did so through his charitable acts of giving rains from heaven and fruitful seasons. It was this gracious and faithful, living creator God who, in this way, satisfied their hearts with food and gladness (14:17). The nature of God, his grace, patience and friendliness, become apparent in that God provides faithfully even for those who ascribe his gifts to their own idols and venerate them.

Human flourishing is intimately related to existing in harmony with the living God. This means knowing and worshiping the creator and true provider of all things. God’s revelation in his creation is to be recognised and appreciated, and he is to be acknowledged accordingly. Human flourishing is dependent on divine care and the provision of sustenance for the body and, in this way also, gladness of heart (14:15–17).

In Athens, Paul proclaims the God unknown to the audience (Acts 17:23). This creator God does not live in temples or need anything humans could provide him with. He is the one who gives life and breath and everything (25). The people he created are to seek him, perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. God is actually not far from every person (27). In God, all people live and have their being (28). Despite their massive idolatry (as evident in a plethora of idols in Athens, 16), God patiently and graciously

overlooked the past times of ignorance, and now calls on all people everywhere to repent (30): the opportunity and call to repentance, rather than judgement, is God's response to human ignorance and failure. One appointed day, God will judge the world in righteousness. Of this he has provided assurance through the resurrection of Jesus (31).

This speech indicates that, for the Paul of Acts, a crucial ingredient of human flourishing is being attuned to what is and can be known about God. It is a life which recognises that God is the one who gives this life and everything else which people need, a life characterised by seeking God and in appreciation of His nearness, a life lived in God and in dependence on him, a life defined by the knowledge of God and in response to his prompting to turn to him, a life oriented towards God's righteousness and, finally, a life under the promise of the sure resurrection from the dead, as God has demonstrated in raising Jesus from the dead. In contrast to much human experience, divine judgement will be just, and lead to the establishment of God's righteousness. While the divine ability and power to resurrect the dead is cited with reference to Jesus (referring back to the earlier misunderstanding of Paul's initial proclamation in Athens, 17:17–20), the prospect of being resurrected one day also contributes to human flourishing in the present.

5. Addressing Christ-followers

Acts contains only one major speech by Paul to a Christian audience. His farewell speech to the elders of Ephesus, consists of a statement of account for his past ministry, and his charge to the elders on how they are to conduct themselves as leaders and continue Paul's ministry (Acts 20:18–35).

In the report of his ministry (Ac 20:18–27, 33–35), Paul recounts how he served with all humility, tears and trials (19). He declared in public and private all that was profitable, “testifying both to Jews and Greeks repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ” (20–21; see also 27). Paul now travels to Jerusalem, “constrained by the Holy Spirit” (22–23), awaiting imprisonment and afflictions. Paul's determined goal is to finish at any cost (“I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself”) his course and the ministry he received from the Lord Jesus, that is, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God (24). Paul testifies to his faithful fulfilment of this commission. For three years, Paul did not cease night or day to admonish everyone with tears (31). Later, he emphasises that the purpose of his ministry was not to enrich himself materially. Rather than coveting what belongs to others (fellow Christ-

followers), Paul provided for himself and others around him. He did so to demonstrate that “by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said: ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive’” (33–35).

In the charge to the elders, Paul emphasises that they must look after each other and the entire congregation. Having been called by the Holy Spirit to their ministry, they must carefully and responsibly care for the Church of God, which He obtained with the blood of his own [Son Jesus] (28). They must be careful as there will be threats from outside and temptations from within (29–30). In all this, they have Paul’s example of faithful ministry to follow (31), and divine provisions: God and the word of his grace (the Gospel of Christ Jesus), which is able to build them up and sustain them in their ministry and the prospect of an inheritance, a heavenly reward, among all those who are sanctified (32, recalling 14:22: “through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God”).

What clues for human flourishing does this speech provide? Paul’s summary of his own ministry indicates that, for him, a good life is characterised as a life of humility, faithful service to God and people, and passing on to others what one was entrusted with, by God. A good life is attuned to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, and is one of experiencing and passing on the grace of God. Human flourishing is closely connected to fulfilling the will of God, despite (or in) all adversity. A good life is a life devoted to others and their well-being, including all the emotions which this might involve. Human flourishing does not come from enriching oneself at the expense of others, but from taking responsibility for one’s own material needs, and providing for others. Human flourishing is built on remembering and following the words of Jesus. It increases when people understand and practise that it is more blessed to give than to receive (time, material means, concern, interest). Paul and Jesus represent the insight expressed by Pennington (2015:3) as “our flourishing is tied to the flourishing of others”. Paul’s Miletus speech is an antidote to the loss of solidarity, rightly identified and bemoaned by Pennington (2015:3) and others as a recent development.

Paul’s charge to the elders suggests that human flourishing needs some binding fellowship and relations (“Pay attention to yourselves”, each individually but also among the group of elders), the willingness to take responsibility for others, and the clear acknowledgement of limits (the church is and remains the flock of God, not the possession of the elders, to be exploited by them at their will). A good life means refraining from

lording it over others and misusing them to serve our interests as if those people belonged to us, but respecting that they belong to (the flock of) God. Human flourishing thrives when people respect this, and treat others accordingly. Foresight and care are needed to prevent dangers and avoid temptations. Human flourishing needs good human examples to follow (people who live transparently for others, to observe and emulate them) and, above all, the example and teaching of Jesus. Human flourishing depends on divine provisions: God and his word, with all the benefits it offers (“Man shall not live by bread alone ...”, Matt 4:4), such as building up and orienting us. Human flourishing is closely tied to the prospect of a divine inheritance, that is, his approval and reward for faithful service in this life. While pursued (and to be pursued) in the present, human flourishing needs this future reference point: a life that will win God’s approval and ensure this inheritance, both now and in the future, will also be a “good” life in the present. This life is not an end in itself, but a means of serving God and others. Without this orientation towards God, human flourishing is limited.

6. Defence speeches before Jewish and non-Jewish audiences

We cannot offer a detailed analysis of the several defence speeches Paul gave in Jerusalem, Caesarea and Rome, before Jewish and non-Jewish audiences.¹¹ In these apologies, Paul explains his pre-Christian past, his rather unexpected encounter with the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus and its implications, that is, his calling to be an apostle to the non-Jews, kings and his fellow Jews (Acts 26:16–18), his deep loyalty to the Jewish people, his initial reluctance to accept this calling and ministry to non-Jews, and how he had fulfilled this commission to the present day: “Therefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout all Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance” (26:19). As a statement of account, Paul ensures: “To this day I have had the help that comes from God, and so I stand here testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass: that the Christ must suffer and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles” (22–23). In certain speeches, Paul also defends in some detail his motives for coming to Jerusalem and his behaviour since he arrived there at the end of the third missionary phase (for instance, in Ac 24:11–21). He is not guilty of profaning the temple, as some of his opponents had claimed, but came as a devout Jew with pious and fully legitimate intentions to Jerusalem

and its temple. He did nothing which would warrant an arrest; he is not guilty of the charges levelled against him.

These speeches suggest that human flourishing is linked to loyalty to ancestral traditions (“a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees”, Ac 23:6; “and to present offerings”, 24:17–18) and to the Jewish people (“I came to bring alms to my nation”, 24:17), the worship of God (24:14), faith in divine revelation (the Law and the prophets, 24:14), a hope in God with regard to the resurrection (24:15) – all essential ingredients of revelation-based Jewish identity. In addition, there is the faithful fulfilment of a divine commission, despite adversities of various kinds, and a life conducted in view of the resurrection of Jesus and of the dead in general (23:6; “So I always take pains to have a clear conscience toward both God and man”, 24:16, 21: “It is with respect to the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial today”) and behaviour characterised by a clear conscience (24:16).

Green (2020: 247) concludes that, according to Luke’s Gospel, “Luke sees happiness not as the goal of living but as the outcome or by-product of living in harmony with the way things are” (*italics mine*).¹² The narrative articulation of the larger context within which human flourishing is possible, is “defined by God’s eschatological intervention to bring salvation in all its fullness to all and, then, by the invitation to persons to order their lives accordingly” (Green 2020: 247). According to Paul’s defence speeches in Luke’s second volume, Paul claims to have done precisely that: with all of his existence, he fully aligned himself for many years with the way things are now in view of God’s salvific intervention in Jesus the Christ, for Jews and non-Jews alike, and with the role which he had been commissioned by the risen and exalted Jesus to play in testifying to these events before Jewish audiences, and in being a light for the non-Jews and, in this way, bringing God’s salvation to the ends of the earth (Ac 13:47). For Paul, such existence and ministry in harmony “with the way things are” meant a good life, and provided the conditions for human flourishing despite adversities and suffering.

7. Summary and implications

The Book of Acts combines a selective portrayal of large periods of Paul’s life and ministry, and summaries of some of his speeches to different audiences. Although Paul suffered considerably as Christ’s emissary to Jews and non-Jews, the account also indicates several factors that are or can be conducive to human flourishing. As we have seen, Paul was blessed and affirmed by God in many ways, surrounded by people who provided fellowship, followed and assisted him in many ways, and he also

had many assets associated with human flourishing on his side. We cannot know whether Paul was “happy”, as we might understand this ambivalent term. What Green (2020: 234) observes with regard to the apostles – that is, “rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonour for the name” (Ac 5:41) – would probably also apply to Paul. The happiness which he experiences “was a by-product of their faithful service”. This portrayal in Acts has to be compared with Paul’s own assertions in his extant letters regarding his own life and the believers’ existence in general (see Shantz 2012). Although there are different nuances, there is much which agrees with the portrayal in Acts.

In his speeches to Jews, non-Jews and Christ-followers, and his various defences, Paul calls people to align themselves a) with God the creator and worship him appropriately, b) with, in particular, his recent salvific activities in Jesus of Nazareth, crucified, resurrected and exalted, and believe in him, and c) with the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. People are to live according to these realities. “With Jesus’s advent, death, and exaltation the times have changed; those who orient their lives to the divine purpose disclosed in Jesus will experience the pleasure and meaningfulness associated with human flourishing within this eschatologically determined world” (Green 2020: 247). According to Green (2020: 235),

Luke’s contribution lies particularly in the context within which happiness thus understood might be cultivated, modulated, and experienced. This context is defined by God’s eschatological intervention to bring salvation in all its fullness to all and, then, by the invitation to persons to order their lives accordingly. ... [This] does not mean that Luke’s narrative is bereft of interest in what we might call the psychological and relational aspects of happiness. It is, rather, that with the advent, death, and exaltation of the Messiah the times have changed, and that humans who orient their lives to the divine purpose disclosed in the Messiah will experience the pleasure and meaningfulness associated with human flourishing within this eschatologically determined world.

This new orientation to God’s salvific purposes is what Paul himself experienced dramatically on the Damascus-road and in the ensuing divine commissions (Ac 9:3–19; 22:3–21; 26:4–23). This fulfilment of the promises and purposes of God is the way things are now; this is the new reality Paul came to understand, accept and align himself with, and in which he came to flourish as Christ’s emissary. Our examination of the portrayal of human flourishing in the “Paul-chapters” of Acts affirms

Green’s (2020: 247) analysis of the Lukan beatitudes: “God describes as happy those who fully align themselves with God’s royal rule revealed in the mission and message of Jesus”. Human flourishing is closely linked to discipleship and to faithful fulfilment of one’s calling, empowered and guided by the Spirit, in fellowship with others and with the prospect of divine reward. Living faithfully and joyfully in harmony with this reality is essential for human flourishing. Far from being a fatalistic acceptance of one’s circumstances, it is a God-centred, joyous acceptance of how God brought about salvation in fulfilment of his promises (for the Lukan motif of joy, see Wenkel 2015). The picture in Acts affirms Pennington’s (2015:3) short summary of Volf’s (2013) analysis that, according to Augustine (and much of the Christian tradition), “human happiness and flourishing come about through the harmonious fellowship of enjoying God and others”. Luke (and Paul) would perhaps have added serving and obeying to enjoying God and serving others.

What we have seen of human flourishing with regard to Paul and his speeches in the Book of Acts presents a much-needed challenge and correction to many developments in our day and age, as summarised by Pennington (2015:3–4). In the end, human flourishing is impossible apart from the faithful God and his salvific purposes, and a genuine concern for the flourishing of other people.

8. Notes

- ¹. For recent studies on the indications for Paul’s own view of the good life, see Shantz (2012: 187–202) and Smith (2020).
- ². It is impossible to ascertain whether Luke reports all instances of Paul’s suffering during the ministry periods which Acts reports, and whether what is reported is indeed representative. For the motives of suffering and joy in Acts, see Cunningham (1997).
- ³. Obviously, our focus on Paul’s speeches determines the results. Focusing on the speeches of Peter in Acts, or all the missionary speeches or other aspects would lead to different results. Our examination of human flourishing in Acts has to be supplemented by other aspects, to secure a comprehensive picture and assess whether (and to what extent) our selection is representative of the entire book. For detailed treatments of the passages under consideration, see the recent commentaries by Schnabel (2012) and Holladay (2016).
- ⁴. For Acts and Paul, see Keener (2012: 221–257). Prior to Paul coming on the scene of Acts, there are other instances of a good life/human flourishing. For instance, there are the descriptions of the earliest community in Acts 2 and 4, including its sharing of goods (often idealised), but also other aspects.
- ⁵. To guess how ancient people might have considered Paul’s life, is difficult to assess. According to the New Testament evidence, Paul had a number of

disciples and people around him who readily co-operated with him (some over longer periods of time), and must have found his life and calling persuasive and attractive, but he also faced critics and staunch adversaries who were irritated by his message and ministry. Whether and how they would have considered the “quality” of Paul’s life can hardly be known from the sources available to us.

6. We do not know what Paul (and Luke) made of the (from our perspective!) fascinating opportunities which this particular calling provided to Paul, such as the chance to travel, seeing significant parts and places of the ancient Mediterranean world, and cross-cultural boundaries. Could and did Paul appreciate these aspects of his ministry as opportunities for human flourishing, or were they more of a burden to him? Some of these opportunities, what they entailed and what might have excited others (see the widespread ancient appreciation of travelling, Casson 1994), seems to have irritated him (Acts 17:16). Due to the circumstances of his travels (far from comfortable!) it seems to have been a burden, if only due to the frequency and dangers involved (see 2Cor 11:23–33).

7. Obviously, these speeches are also part of the Lukan portrayal of Paul. For a detailed assessment of the speeches of Acts, see Keener (2012: 258–319).

8. Readers need to keep this focus in mind. It is one major aspect of a good life, but not the only one to consider.

9. Later on, the missionaries indicate that the word of God had to be spoken first to the Jews, respecting the salvation-historical priority of Israel. In their mission, Paul and Barnabas see the command in Isa 49:6, of being a light to the non-Jews, fulfilled (Acts 13:46–48). They are called to bring salvation to the end of the earth. A good life lies in fulfilling this call, and in offering God’s salvation to others.

10. For a detailed treatment see Stenschke (1999: 185–190, 210–221).

11. In analogy to the missionary speeches earlier in Acts, there are also shorter summaries of Paul’s defences before various officials (e.g., Acts 25:8, 10–11).

12. Green (2020: 234) notes: “With the Stoics and against the Epicureans, Luke sees happiness as the effect or by-product of living in harmony with the way things are. ... Luke has a particular perspective on ‘the way things are’, and thus what it might mean to live, as the Stoics might put it, in harmony with the natural order of things”.

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Author’s Declaration

The author declares that there is no financial gain or personal relationship(s) that inappropriately influenced him in the writing of this article.

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