

Acts

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. (Acts 1:8 ESV)

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts 2:42 ESV)

I Have Many In This City Who Are My People

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Acts 18:1-11

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Introduction:

Good morning, Redeemer and Simcoside! I want to invite you to turn with me in your Bibles to Acts 18.

In our text this morning, we find the Apostle Paul in the city of Corinth – a city with a population surpassing 200,000 people at the time of Paul's ministry.¹ In modern terms, Corinth was like the Toronto of its region. It was a big city with big influence. This was the kind of ministry opportunity that Paul *dreamed* about!

Not only was Corinth a massive city with enormous potential, but we read in our text today that Paul's early ministry in Corinth was extremely successful. We're going to read about conversions and baptisms and even the *ruler of the synagogue* is going to surrender his life to the Lord!

But there is a detail in this story that is not immediately obvious in the text. We are going to come to see this morning that – in spite of the early success in this influential city – the Apostle Paul was weary and in need of encouragement. The encouragement that he received is encouragement that each and every one of us will need to draw from in seasons of our own weariness. To that end, look with me now to Acts 18. We're going to be reading verses 1-11. Hear now God's holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today.

¹ Richard N. Longenecker, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary (John - Acts)*, ed. Frank A. Gaebelin, vol. 9, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), 480.

After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. ² And he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. And he went to see them, ³ and because he was of the same trade he stayed with them and worked, for they were tentmakers by trade. ⁴ And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and tried to persuade Jews and Greeks.

⁵ When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, Paul was occupied with the word, testifying to the Jews that the Christ was Jesus. ⁶ And when they opposed and reviled him, he shook out his garments and said to them, “Your blood be on your own heads! I am innocent. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.” ⁷ And he left there and went to the house of a man named Titius Justus, a worshiper of God. His house was next door to the synagogue. ⁸ Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed in the Lord, together with his entire household. And many of the Corinthians hearing Paul believed and were baptized. ⁹ And the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, “Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, ¹⁰ for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people.” ¹¹ And he stayed a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them. (Acts 18:1-11 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

As we begin, I want to draw your attention this morning to a curious detail. Look again with me at verses 8-9. There is a strange flow of thought in these verses. Verse 8 describes a series of impressive victories!

Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed in the Lord, together with his entire household. And many of the Corinthians hearing Paul believed and were baptized. (Acts 18:8 ESV)

The ruler of the synagogue got saved?! And his whole household?! And then many more Corinthians were saved and baptized?! That is a HUGE win! You would think that Paul would be over the moon! You would think that he would be more confident and more courageous than ever!

Which makes verse 9 an interesting contrast:

And the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, “Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent (Acts 18:9 ESV)

You wouldn't think that Paul would need a spiritual pep talk after the success that he had just witnessed. There's nothing in verse 8 that would suggest that Paul was in anyway fearful or

discouraged. As outsiders looking in, perhaps we've even come to see Paul as almost *superhuman*. He always gets back up! He never shies away from the hard thing! He always presses forward!

But there was a battle going on behind the scenes.

We catch a glimpse into this inner turmoil in Paul's letter to these same Corinthians. Listen to the way that Paul recounts his time with these believers. In 1 Corinthians 2:3, we read:

And I was with you **in weakness and in fear and much trembling** (1 Corinthians 2:3
ESV)

Brothers and sisters, I really believe that we need to see this.

Sometimes the years and years of pressing forward and pushing through finally take their toll on a person. Even the people that you revere and respect – even Apostles – sometimes find themselves under the dark clouds of discouragement. I think that's what we see here in the Apostle Paul.

He was stoned and left for dead at Lystra. Then he was imprisoned in Philippi. Then he was chased out of Thessalonica, and then again out of Berea. And then – having been forced away from his friends – he took on a solo ministry in Athens where he preached every day to people who referred to him as a “babbling.” As one commentator observes:

So he must've travelled from Athens to Corinth in a dejected mood, wondering what worse could happen and why God had allowed matters to fall out so badly.²

And now he's here in Corinth, and he's actually seeing some real progress! Just what the doctor ordered, right? And yet, he still finds himself feeling weak and fearful. Sometimes, you can get so used to everything going wrong that you don't know what to do with yourself when things go right. Amen? I think that's what was happening in Paul's heart here.

What does a person like that need to hear? How do you encourage someone who is weary after a long season of adversity after adversity? In our text today, we find:

² Richard N. Longenecker, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary (John - Acts)*, ed. Frank A. Gaebelin, vol. 9, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), 479.

A Word of Encouragement for the Weary

Jesus speaks two simple, yet profound truths to Paul that every weary believer needs to hear. I want to show these to you, and then we're going to spend some time really focusing in on application. The first thing we see in this text is that the weary believer needs to hear Jesus say:

1. I am with you

Look again at verses 9-10:

And the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, "Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, ¹⁰ **for I am with you** (Acts 18:9-10a ESV)

I want you to notice that little word "for" at the start of verse 10. Jesus is telling Paul not to be afraid and to go on speaking – but how? How can Paul press through when he is so weary? How can Jesus ask him to do something that feels so impossible? "**FOR** I am with you." THAT'S how.

Listen: Paul had every earthly reason to be afraid. The world HATED him! Powerful people wanted him dead! His body ached from the beatings he had endured. And now, the synagogue in Corinth had cast him out. It was only a matter of time before they adopted the same tactics. I can imagine Paul catastrophizing in his mind: "Not again! I'm so tired! I've only just now been reunited with my team! I haven't even caught my breath yet from the last wave that crashed over my head. My body hasn't even healed. My HEART hasn't healed! I don't know if I can do this again!"

And Jesus says: "You can keep going, Paul, because I'm right here with you."

That's what Paul needed. That's what you need. That's what I need. When Jesus sent us out into the world on this seemingly impossible assignment he said:

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And **behold, I am with you always**, to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:18b-20 ESV)

Not even the Apostle Paul could carry on in ministry without this reminder. When we lose sight of Jesus – when we forget that he is right here with us – we fall to pieces.

It seems that Paul had lost sight of that for a season in Corinth. And it left him feeling – in his own words – weakness, fear and much trembling.

We can't minister out of fear. Fear makes us shut our mouths. Maybe, for some of us, this is why our evangelism has dried up. In the early days, we told everyone about the hope that we had, and we had a very real sense of the Lord's presence in our lives. But now He feels distant, and the courage we once had has shrivelled up. We know that we should go on speaking, and we feel guilty that we aren't, but we can't seem to muster up the courage. Is that you this morning? Then lean in and receive this reminder from your saviour:

“Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, ¹⁰ **for I am with you** (Acts 18:9b-10a ESV)

He is with you. If you can't see him this morning, then stop listening to me now and spend the rest of this morning asking him to open your eyes to see what you need to see. He IS with you. And seeing that changes everything.

The weary believer needs to hear that. But then the weary believer also needs to hear Jesus say:

2. I have many in this city who are my people

Look again at verse 10:

for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, **for I have many in this city who are my people.** (Acts 18:10 ESV)

What exactly is Jesus saying here? Is he suggesting that there is already a strong band of Christians in the city who are going to intimidate Paul's opponents? Is Jesus suggesting that there are some Christians in authority who will afford Paul political protection? No, he's saying something far more profound. As one commentator explains:

The statement implies divine foreknowledge of future conversions.³

³ Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 761.

Jesus is saying here that there are many people in the city of Corinth who have been set apart before the foundation of the world to respond in faith to the message of the gospel. They don't know it yet. They haven't heard it yet. But they belong to Jesus.

We've often used the analogy of a dog whistle. If you blow a dog whistle in a park, no one will hear you. They will go about their day completely unaffected. But the DOGS in the park have ears to hear, and they will ALL respond. In this text, Jesus is telling Paul that there are people in the city of Corinth who have been given ears to hear the gospel. Paul just needs to "blow the whistle."

This reality *massively* shaped the Apostle Paul's theology. He would later write to the Ephesians and explain:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, ⁴ **even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world**, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love ⁵ **he predestined us for adoption to himself** as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will (Ephesians 1:3-5 ESV)

Paul writes, "Before the foundation of the world, God **CHOSE US!** He **PREDESTINED** us for adoption! This is a mind-blowing reality!" Similarly, he would write in Romans 8:

For **those whom he foreknew he also predestined** to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.³⁰ And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified. (Romans 8:29-30 ESV)

When Paul considered the electing love of God, it filled him with praise, and it filled him with confidence!

Now, interestingly, in this same story where we are reminded of the electing love of God, we also see an emphasis on human responsibility. Look again at verses 5-6:

When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, Paul was occupied with the word, testifying to the Jews that the Christ was Jesus. ⁶ And when they opposed and reviled him, he shook out his garments and said to them, "**Your blood be on your own heads!** I am innocent. From now on I will go to the Gentiles." (Acts 18:5-6 ESV)

One of the lessons that we learn in Acts 18 is that we are responsible for how we respond to the gospel. When people reject Jesus' invitation, they are *guilty*. So, we see in one story these two truths on full display: God is sovereign over salvation – he has already set people apart for himself in the city of Corinth – and we are responsible for our decisions – Paul was responsible to keep preaching and those who rejected the gospel were responsible for their unbelief. If you find that those two truths are difficult to hold in tension, you are in good company. Charles Spurgeon said:

These two truths, I do believe, can never be welded into one upon any human anvil, but one they shall be in eternity: they are two lines that are so nearly parallel, that the mind that shall pursue them farthest, will never discover that they converge; but they do converge, and they will meet somewhere in eternity, close to the throne of God, whence all truth doth spring.⁴

In other words, one day we will see how these two seemingly contradictory realities fit together. For now, we simply need to acknowledge that *both* of these truths are expressed clearly in the Bible.

And in our text this morning, we are reminded that what we *really* need to see is that the sovereignty of God is a doctrine that is meant to *encourage* us! Jesus didn't raise this point to stimulate a theological debate. He pointed Paul to this truth *so as to steady him!* There is something about the knowledge of the sovereignty of God that is supposed to breathe life into the heart of the weary Christian. To that end, I want to ask the question:

How Does the Doctrine of God's Sovereignty Steady Us?

I believe we can draw out three answers to that question from the passage in front of us. First:

1. It enables us to trust an impossible plan

In city after city Paul has marched into the synagogue and preached the gospel, and then he's taken the gospel to the streets and preached it to anyone who would listen to him. In city after city, Paul has been expelled from the synagogue and has been harassed in the streets. Of course, there

⁴ Charles Spurgeon, 'Sovereign Grace and Man's Responsibility', sermon, delivered on Aug 1, 1858.

were conversions along the way, but it appears that the discouraging pattern of ministry was beginning to affect Paul by the time he reached Corinth.

I suspect Paul was probably wrestling with some difficult questions internally. Questions like: “Is this really going to work, Jesus? You told us to make disciples of all the nations, but I just preached my heart out in Athens to thousands and only *a handful* of people responded! Am I really supposed to keep going with this?”

I don’t know exactly what Paul was asking, but I DO know that – whatever the specific discouragement was – the encouragement that Paul received from Jesus was: “I have many in this city who are my people.”

In other words, Jesus said to Paul: “Keep preaching! I have drawn up this plan for you because it WORKS! And you will *see* it working, but you need to keep preaching.”

Paul needed to hear that. And as he pressed forward in obedience, he watched as God drew His people to Himself. The impossible is made possible.

Maybe some of you need to hear that word of encouragement this morning. Maybe Jesus is pressing this truth upon your heart even as I speak. “I have many in this city who are my people. I have many on your street who are my people. I have many in your workplace who are my people.”

It feels impossible sometimes, doesn’t it? In a culture that is saturated with unbelief, is there *anyone* who will respond to the gospel? Jesus’ answer to that question is a clear and resounding “YES!” There ARE people out there who will respond! There ARE people out there who’s hearts will burn within them as they hear the message of the gospel! There ARE people out there who were set apart before the foundation of the world to hear and to respond! Paul asks in his letter to the Romans:

How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? (Romans 10:14 ESV)

THROW THE SEED, brothers and sisters! There are hearts that are ready – there is soil that has been tilled! BLOW THE WHISTLE! There are ears that have been tuned to hear and believe! PREACH THE GOSPEL! How will they hear without someone preaching?

If it was up to us to change hearts – if it was dependent upon our strategies and our winsomeness – then this city would be doomed! That would be an impossible assignment.

But it's not up to us. It's up to Him. All we need to do is to be faithful with the task that He's entrusted to us – all we need to do is to preach the word and to proclaim the gospel – and He will soften hearts and open eyes. Because he has many in this city who are his people. Let's find them!

When we believe in the sovereignty of God, it enables us to trust an impossible plan. Second:

2. It enables us to endure in impossible circumstances

I don't think that it is too much of a stretch to suggest that Paul was legitimately struggling with fear. If we look back at verse 10, this was the fear that Jesus clearly addressed. He said:

and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people.
(Acts 18:10b ESV)

Paul seems to have been feeling the very human fear of pain and discomfort.

Can I tell you something? I'm so glad that this text is here because, as we have considered the stories of Paul singing in prison and marching back into the cities that stoned him, we might be tempted to lose sight of the *humanity* of Paul. The reality is, those striking displays of courage and joy are made more powerful when we realize that Paul was just a guy like us. He was not immune to the temptation to fear. And now, as Paul has been rejected by the Corinthian synagogue and as the church is growing rapidly, he seems to be wrestling with fear that another beating was soon on its way. The old preacher G. Campbell Morgan makes a powerful observation here. He notes:

It is often in the hour of success, that the fear of opposition and hostility is born. This man, beaten, bruised, and stoned, bearing in his very body the brands of Jesus, knew what was going on in Corinth, against him, and he was filled with fear.⁵

But, in this word of comfort, Jesus reminded Paul that no persecution would ever touch him apart from the perfect plan of God. Paul does not need to fear his adversaries because they CANNOT thwart a plan that has been set in motion since before the world began!

⁵ G. Campbell Morgan, *The Acts Of The Apostles* (New York, NY: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1924), 433.

In other words, if we believe that God has sovereignly set people apart for salvation from every tribe, tongue and nation, then we can be sure that – as we reach out to the world with the gospel – there is no opposition that can possibly stop the mission. Therefore, if and when we *do* face adversity, we can know that God has sovereignly ordained that adversity for our good and for the spread of the gospel. Paul said exactly that in Romans 8:28:

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. (Romans 8:28 ESV)

The stoning of Stephen led to a scattering of Christians into the world which really *began* the mission's movement in the church. The imprisonment of Paul led to the conversion of the Philippian jailer and his family and the beginning of a robust church in Philippi. There are no external forces that can thwart God's mission in the world. There is no such thing as meaningless suffering in the life of the Christian.

Jesus had put a plan in motion to save his people in Corinth, and there was no power of hell nor scheme of man that could threaten to impede the plan that had been in motion from the very beginning. Paul had nothing to fear. And neither do we. God is in control. He really, truly is. When we see and believe this, it enables us to endure in impossible circumstances.

Third, and finally:

3. It enables us to believe for impossible change

I suspect that one of the primary reasons why Paul was so discouraged was because Corinth was a particularly wicked city. As one commentator explains:

Beginning with the fifth century B.C., the verb "to Corinthianize" meant to be sexually immoral, a reputation that continued to be well-deserved in Paul's day.⁶

⁶ Richard N. Longenecker, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary (John - Acts)*, ed. Frank A. Gaebelin, vol. 9, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), 480.

The temple to Aphrodite was a prominent fixture in the city, and the temple was filled with cult prostitutes. In Corinth, sexual immorality wasn't just something people *did*. It was something people *celebrated*. It was a proud and prominent part of the city's cultural identity.

Last Sunday, we saw that Paul was provoked in his spirit by the idol worship in Athens. Paul was no robot, and the shameless sin that was flaunted in Corinth must have broken his heart. G. Campbell Morgan says here:

The Lord knew the lurking fear in the heart of His servant, fear born of his overwhelming sense of the corruption of the city, of the almost impossibility of doing anything there that was worth the doing.⁷

Can the gospel really change a city like this?

Can the gospel really transform a people like this?

I confess, I fell into despair on this issue just this past week. Sometimes we are faced with situations where the only solution would involve *impossible change*.

Can the identity of a city be rewritten? Can the mind of an addict be rewired? Can spiritually dead people come to life?

Humanly speaking, the answer is no.

Ultimately, people do what they want to do, and they can't simply flip a switch to start wanting Jesus. If it's up to you and me to try to twist their arms so that they'll change their minds, then this is a hopeless assignment. I can't talk hard hearts into becoming soft. I can't talk spiritually dead people into becoming spiritually alive. And neither can you.

We cannot bring about impossible change.

But He can. And He does. Paul wrote to the Ephesians and explained:

⁷ G. Campbell Morgan, *The Acts Of The Apostles* (New York, NY: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1924), 429.

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— (Ephesians 2:4-5 ESV)

God CAN and God DOES bring spiritually dead people to life! He does it because of the love with which he loved us **even when we were dead in our trespasses!** God, in His grace, picks up rebellious, spiritually dead sinners and He pays for their sin at the cross, and He fills them with His Holy Spirit, and He makes them into a new creation! That *whole plan of redemption* was put into motion before the foundation of the world!

And since I don't know His timeline, I don't know if or when the person I am praying for and ministering to will change. What I DO know, is that I need to keep ministering in faith because the sovereignty of God enables me to believe for IMPOSSIBLE CHANGE! He can do it! He has done it! And He will do it again. Jesus said:

“Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, ¹⁰ for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people.” (Acts 18:9b-10 ESV)

Let's pray together.