



Catalog No. 1270

Acts 18:1-17

Twenty-eighth Message

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March 19th, 2006

FINDING COURAGE IN CORINTH

SERIES: THE SPREADING FLAME

We return this morning to our study in the book of Acts, which we left off last October. Before Jesus departed from this earth he promised that when the Spirit came, he would give power to witness, and he commissioned his witnesses to penetrate to the ends of the earth. Acts traces the fulfillment of that promise.

Today we will join the apostle Paul on his second missionary journey. With his associates, Silas and Timothy, he will break new ground, establishing churches in three Roman provinces which they did not visit during the first missionary journey to Cyprus and Galatia. This time they will preach the gospel in Macedonia, northern Greece, in Achaia, southern Greece, and in Asia, southwest Turkey. In each case they will include the capital cities in their itinerary: Thessalonica, the capital of Macedonia, Corinth, the capital of Achaia (where they stayed 18 months), and Ephesus, the capital of Asia. In each case, Paul will write a letter or multiple letters to these churches: the letters to the Thessalonians, the Corinthians, and the Ephesians.

At this time in his life and ministry it is obvious that Paul is afraid. At times we tend to think that the men and women of the Bible are super heroic figures, like Superman and Wonder Woman. We imagine they don't have the same frustrations and fears that we have. But of course, that is false; they are just like us. At this time in Paul's life he was troubled and pressured, and he became quite afraid.

And not without reason. He had been through a lot already on this second missionary journey. He had departed four cities in succession under duress—beaten, dismissed, harassed and ridiculed. In Philippi, he was overwhelmed by a mob, beaten with rods, thrown into jail, locked in stocks and left to suffer. He had no idea what his fate would be as midnight drew near and the earth quaked. In Thessalonica, he was attacked by Jews in another mob scene and driven out of the city, and they continued their opposition in Berea. Arriving finally in Athens, he preached in that great intellectual center, There he was derided and called a “seed picker.”

Paul is alone at this point. Forced to leave Berea and travel on to Athens, he left word for Timothy and Silas to join him as soon as possible. But they never came. Paul began and ended his ministry in Athens by himself. Moving on to the next place, it appears that he is out of money, too.

**After these things he left Athens and went to Corinth.
(Acts 18:1 NASB)**

“These things” refers to the events in chapter 17 which we already seen—the ridicule of the philosophers in Athens and their polite dismissal. So from Athens, Paul goes on to Corinth, located about 50 miles southwest at the neck of the narrow isthmus connecting the two parts of Greece. Paul went there to meet Silas and Timothy, whom he expected to journey down from Macedonia. Corinth was a large seaport, and that is where Paul expected to find his colleagues.

Upwards of 700,000 people lived in Corinth, half of them slaves. The capital of the province of Achaia, Corinth was a big, bustling cosmopolitan city, much like San Francisco or Seattle. It was a multi-lingual, multi-racial center, a melting pot where people from all over the Roman Empire came to live. Corinth was a key city in Ancient Greece until it was destroyed by the Romans in 146 B.C. Julius Caesar rebuilt it as a Roman colony in 46 B.C., and it grew and prospered, largely because of its unique geographical location. It controlled all north-south land traffic, and became a prosperous center of trade and commerce. Corinth was wealthy and influential. Luxury and excess were the norm. And it was an unusually wicked city. In fact, the ancients coined a phrase, “to Corinthianize,” to describe unusual forms of sex practiced there.

Corinth was filled with shrines and temples, but dominating the city was a 2000-foot hill on which stood a large temple to Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love. A thousand priestesses of the temple, sacred prostitutes, came down into the city when evening fell and roamed the streets as prostitutes. We could describe Corinth in three phrases: intellectually alert, materially prosperous, and morally corrupt.

Here was where Paul found himself. It's not certain he even wanted to go to Corinth. The call he received was to go to Macedonia, in northern Greece, but he was thrown out of one town after another, including Philippi and Thessalonica. He wanted to go to Macedonia but, hindered from going there, he went to Corinth, hoping to meet up with Silas and Timothy.

Our text this morning is a beautiful picture of how God encourages his weary and discouraged children. It begins with a wonderfully serendipitous encounter.

And he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, having recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. He came to them, and because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them and they were working, for by

trade they were tent-makers. And he was reasoning in the synagogue every Sabbath and trying to persuade Jews and Greeks. (18:2-4)

Out of funds, Paul strolls through the marketplace, probably looking for work. There he meets a dynamic couple, Priscilla and Aquila, who are also in Corinth because of duress.

This couple is mentioned six times in the New Testament, and on four occasions Priscilla's name is mentioned first—a highly unusual occurrence. In his epistles, Paul refers to her by her formal name, Prisca. She apparently was the more outgoing, talkative one. Possibly she had the most impact on people. Paul's friendship with this couple lasted for 16 or 17 years. It's likely they were very young when he met them. Apparently they had no children. For two years a church met in their home in Ephesus. Paul sent them back to Rome as forerunners, and a church met in their house there for 6-10 years. Then they returned to Ephesus.

Luke says they were forced to leave Rome. Claudius had commanded all the Jews to depart the city. Suetonius, one of the early Roman historians, referred to this in his book *Life of Claudius*: “because the Jews were making constant disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he banished them from Rome.”¹ Historians think that this is the author's misspelling of the word Christus, or Christ. If that is true, these new Christians were evangelizing in Rome, and the same thing happened to them as Paul. These disturbances in the Jewish community had been caused by the gospel. As a result, Claudius threw all the Jews out, including Priscilla and Aquila. This was no small thing for them. Aquila, a leather maker, lost his shop, his clientele and his home. He probably came to Corinth, the nearest large seaport, and set up shop in the marketplace.

As the apostle walked around the city looking for work, he met this dynamic couple that plied the same trade. He discovered they were both Christians, and they established an immediate rapport.

Imagine how Paul felt in this metropolis with no churches and no believers. Christianity was probably virtually unheard of. If people knew of it at all, it was probably a distorted form of the gospel. Then he just happened to run into the one believing couple in this large city. Because they were of the same trade, Paul moved in with them.

Paul worked during the day and probably studied at night. On the Sabbath, he went into the synagogues and looked for opportunities to preach. Apparently there wasn't much response because of the way Luke puts it: “[he was] trying to persuade Jews and Greeks.”

But when Silas and Timothy came down from Macedonia, Paul began devoting himself completely to the word, solemnly testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ. But when they resisted and blasphemed, he shook out his garments and said to them, “Your blood be on your own heads! I am clean. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.” Then he left there and went to the house of a man named

Titius Justus, a worshiper of God, whose house was next to the synagogue. Crispus, the leader of the synagogue, believed in the Lord with all his household, and many of the Corinthians when they heard were believing and being baptized. (18:5-8)

Silas and Timothy finally arrive in Corinth, bringing good news about the church in Thessalonica, that their faith and love were standing firm (1 Thess 3:6-10), and carrying with them money from the believers in Macedonia. Paul refers to this gift in Corinthians and again in Philippians. He was now free to stop working. As Luke puts it, he “began devoting himself completely to the word.” He gave himself full-time to evangelizing the city.

As was Paul's custom, he began his ministry in the synagogue. As usual, the preaching of a crucified Christ aroused the hatred and the enmity of the Jews. They opposed and reviled him, leading the apostle to repeat the drastic step he had taken in Pisidian Antioch (13:46, 51) and turning to the Gentiles. He expresses that decision in a dramatic way, basically telling them, “I have done everything I can do to deliver you from your deathlike state. You have heard the truth and have resisted. As long as you hold out there is nothing more I can do.”

But he didn't go very far. There is a little humor here. Paul goes next door and starts a home Bible study right next to the synagogue. Archeologists believe they have discovered the location of this synagogue. A stone lintel has been uncovered, with an inscription crudely carved, reading The Synagogue of the Hebrews, and it is dated right about this time.

A God-fearer named Titius Justus who had listened to Paul and been persuaded of the truth he taught, offers his home to Paul, so the apostle moves to this neutral site that had so many advantages. Those who had been accustomed to attending the synagogue didn't have to leave their habitual route if they wished to continue listening to Paul. They could make their way to the synagogue as usual but simply turn in next door. This neutral location would also be much more attractive to the gentiles, many of whom would never go to a synagogue, but they would go to a house that didn't have all the religious trappings. People who didn't want anything to do with institutional religion came and heard Paul teach the Scriptures, and many of them were finding Christ. The gospel was spreading all over Corinth. The leading Jew in the city, the ruler of the synagogue, was converted, together with his entire family. But as was always the case, when things began happening spiritually, opposition arose.

Having been in this situation before, Paul sees the handwriting on the wall. The pattern was very predictable. How many times had he come to the synagogue and spoken to the Jews only to have his message rejected. Then he turned to the Gentiles and a great flood of people responded, arousing the anger and hostility of the Jews. Paul knew that the next step was trouble, usually involving a riot and physical harm to him.

He must have felt like a football after a touchdown: he knew he was going to be spiked or kicked down field. He becomes frightened, and the Lord graciously intervenes.

And the Lord said to Paul in the night by a vision, “Do not be afraid any longer, but go on speaking and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no man will attack you in order to harm you, for I have many people in this city.” (18:9-10)

Paul was overcome with fear and discouragement, and our Lord appears to him and tells him, literally, “Stop being afraid!...for I am with you.” What a gracious and encouraging word! That is always the Lord’s answer to us when we are afraid. He is with us. He is right here. He is everything we need.

Furthermore, the Lord tells Paul: “no man will attack you in order to harm you, for I have many people in this city.” This wasn’t a promise to Paul that he would not be harmed. In the past, the apostle was beaten, imprisoned, battered and left for dead. All kinds of dreadful things happened to him. Nor is this a promise that no harm will come to us. This was a special promise to Paul in this particular situation. God told him, “You will not be harmed because I have many people in this city.” I am not sure that “the many people” that the Lord referred to were even believers yet.

What a great expression of the heart of God! He loved these Corinthians, many of whom would not make great neighbors. He wanted to gather them in. This gives us insight into what matters to God, and what matters in life. God is not concerned about our comfort or affluence. There isn’t anything wrong with those things, and there isn’t any particular virtue in seeking hardship. But God’s major priority is reaching people. If that involves hardship for us, that is all right with him.

The Roman Empire couldn’t touch Paul. They had no power over him, because there was work to be done. As Augustine said, “We are immortal until our work is done.” That is, until God is done with us, with both the work he is doing in us and the work he is doing through us, no can really harm us. That is a tremendous comfort to us. One thing we can know for sure is that if we die, our work is finished.

The point that Luke is making here is that the highest priority in God’s eyes is his kingdom and the extension of his sovereignty and rule over hearts. God wants to enthrone himself in our hearts and increasingly grow in the measure of his sovereignty in our lives. And secondly, he wants to use us to extend this kingdom to others. That is the highest good. He may not have things go well in our lives to accomplish this goal, because that isn’t the main thing. That was Paul’s assurance.

Luke records one more instance of God’s sovereignty in Paul’s ministry in Corinth:

And he settled there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them. But while Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews with one accord rose up against Paul

and brought him before the judgment seat, saying, “This man persuades men to worship God contrary to the law.” But when Paul was about to open his mouth, Gallio said to the Jews, “If it were a matter of wrong or of vicious crime, O Jews, it would be reasonable for me to put up with you; but if there are questions about words and names and your own law, look after it yourselves; I am unwilling to be a judge of these matters.” And he drove them away from the judgment seat. And they all took hold of Sosthenes, the leader of the synagogue, and began beating him in front of the judgment seat. But Gallio was not concerned about any of these things. (18:11-17)

Luke doesn’t give many details about Paul’s relatively long, 18-month ministry, but he describes an event that happened during that period that significantly affected his ministry and Christianity’s positive legal standing in the Roman Empire, and which once again highlights God’s sovereignty.

Paul was in Corinth from the fall of A.D. 50 until the spring of 52. In A.D. 51, Gallio became the governor of Achaia, where Corinth was located. During this man’s term, the Jews brought Paul to him, charging the apostle with persuading the people to worship God in ways contrary to the law.

This tribunal where this took place has been excavated. In Greek it is called the *bema*, the scale, i.e., the judgment seat. It appears that the Jews’ motive in bringing Paul to Gallio was to show that Christianity was not truly Jewish and therefore could not be included in Judaism or claim protection under Roman law. But Gallio didn’t buy that. In fact, before Paul has a chance to open his mouth and defend himself, this pagan governor defends him, recognizing that this was an internal matter having to do with religious affairs. It wasn’t a matter of Roman law, but one of theology. Gallio saw that he had no jurisdiction in this matter. It seems that he dismissed them and they wouldn’t leave so he had to drive them away.

There is a bit of irony in verse 17. Apparently, Sosthenes, Crispus’s successor in the synagogue, botched the trial so badly that the Jews turned against him and beat him up in front of the tribunal. Interestingly, the beating might have had a beneficial effect, because in Paul’s first letter to this church he says: “Paul, an apostle of Christ, and Sosthenes, our brother, to the church at Corinth.”

I am not advocating beating as a method of Christian evangelism, but it does appear that it had a positive effect in this case. When these Jews turned against him, Sosthenes’s eyes were opened and he may have begun to realize their cause was not so just after all. He responded to the gospel, and now here he is, a co-laborer with Paul in spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ. All this is a beautiful picture of how, behind the scenes, God uses all kinds of circumstances, positive and negative, to advance his kingdom.

Gallio’s brother was Seneca, the Stoic philosopher, who described Gallio in his writings as “sweet Gallio.” He was a

gentle, kind man, and apparently wise as well. He recognized that this had nothing to do with Roman law.

Luke does not refer to the significance of this action, but we see how important it was. If Gallio had ruled against Paul, the other governors would have followed his precedent and the gospel would have been suppressed all over the Roman Empire, an action that would have become Roman law. Then it would have been impossible for Paul to preach in public or for Christians to evangelize, and the whole movement would have had to go underground. Eventually it did, of course, when Nero declared Christianity illegal. But before that the gospel was proclaimed freely for 10 to 20 years and thousands came to Christ, all because one pagan Roman judge was used of God to judge properly.

The thing that seems to echo throughout this passage is God's sovereign control of all these events. His desire, his heart was to reach the Corinthians, pagans whom we would not think were interested in spiritual things. But God loved them, and he wanted to reach them. God saw to it that Paul just happened to be in Corinth waiting for his friends. It didn't seem to be Paul's intention to even go to Corinth, much less preach there. God saw to it that Priscilla and Aquila got to the right place at the right time. He used a pagan emperor to drive this couple out of Rome and put them in Corinth at the right time to meet Paul and encourage him. And God saw to it that they got thrown out of the synagogue so they could go a neutral place where they could reach even more people.

There was a lot of stress and discomfort in the midst of all those events, but through it all we see God working to bring about the highest good, which is the inclusion into the church of all those whom God loved. He even uses a disinterested, pagan governor to accomplish his good purposes, even unbelieving political leaders. God's highest priority is bringing people into his family and then growing them into Christlikeness. And he uses all kinds of difficult means to accomplish that end. He doesn't mind making us uncomfortable, putting pressure on us.

As I reflect on this passage and its application to our lives, I am convicted that we need to have the same attitude toward life as God. The highest goal in life is not our comfort or security, but the fulfillment of God's will and the extension of his kingdom. We have a tendency at times to get confused. We think that the most important thing in life is our happiness and well-being. But it's not all about us; it's all about Christ. He is the lead actor in this great redemptive drama in which all of us have parts. Ours is a supporting role. At times we need reminders. We become myopic. We think we have the lead part, and that it all about us, our comfort, security and family. But it's all about God. And sometimes that involves our discomfort, if that helps the kingdom to grow. Jesus said he will build his church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. God has a plan, a beautiful, wonderful plan in which he allows us to play a part.

Let us remember that. There are people in your company, on your campus and in your neighborhood whom God loves and longs to reach. May we hear those same encouraging words that the apostle heard: "Stop being afraid...for I am with you." What an encouraging word!

1. John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Acts* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1990), 296.

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