

October 13, 2024

As You Are Going: “I Have Many in this City”

Acts 18:1-17

Vernon Advent Christian Church

Intro

As we’ve been working our way through the book of Acts, we’ve seen the Apostle Paul spreading the gospel in city after city throughout the Roman empire. His efforts are even more amazing when you consider the persecution he endured in almost every city he visited. In fact, the perseverance he showed is so remarkable that it can be tempting for us to view him like Superman at times as if he were indestructible and not subject to the weaknesses and limitations that us “ordinary” people have.

That’s why I appreciate passages like the one we’re going to look at today so much. It reminds us that nobody, not even the great Apostle Paul, is immune to discouragement. We all have limitations and times of weakness and seasons when we’re just struggling. So I think we all need to hear the words of encouragement that God gives to Paul here in this passage as we read about Paul’s time in the city of Corinth. If you are able, please stand with me as I read God’s word. [Read passage]

Now, in some ways, the fact that Paul was discouraged here in Corinth might initially seem to be a bit odd because, at first glance, things seem to be going pretty well as he began his ministry there. Right off the bat, we see that ministry is best done in partnership. We are not meant to be alone in gospel ministry. In verses 1-3, we read about how Paul meets a couple named Aquila and Priscilla, who would eventually become some of his best friends. We’re told that they had recently arrived in Corinth after being kicked out of Rome, along with all other Jews, by the Roman Emperor, Claudius. And they shared something in common, besides being Jews and having a relationship with Jesus, they were all tentmakers and we get the impression that was how they made a living after first arriving Corinth. Now, we will see Aquila and Priscilla again as we continue on in Acts as they become faithful ministry partners with Paul and they are also mentioned in a number of his letters.

And not only does Paul meet these new friends but we’re also told his missionary partners, Silas and Timothy, are able to join him once again. Remember last week, Paul had been waiting on them in Athens. And we’re not told how long that took or when Paul left Athens but he did and now they finally catch up with him here in Corinth.

Another thing that should’ve brought some encouragement to Paul was that they brought with them a sizeable financial gift from the churches in Macedonia. (partnership) That gift isn’t mentioned explicitly in this passage, we learn about it in 2 Cor. 11:9 and also in Phil. 4:15, but we do see at least an indication that this gift was received here in Acts 18. Vs. 5 states that... [Read]. The way the ESV translates the text as “was occupied” is admittedly a bit unclear. But other translations say that Paul “began to be occupied.” So, at first in Corinth, Paul relied on tentmaking for income, but when Silas and Timothy came with the large financial gift, he was able to devote himself exclusively to proclaiming the gospel as his full-time occupation, we might say. So you’d think that would be an encouragement for him. I know I’m usually pretty happy when I receive large sums of money. It doesn’t happen that often, but whenever it does, it’s usually a pretty good day.

So, everything seems to be going well for Paul so far in Corinth. But, just like everywhere else where Paul preached the gospel, once again he faced persecution from the Jews and we read about that in vs. 6. It says the Jews “opposed and reviled him.” The word translated “opposed” is a military term that was used to describe when an army put itself in position of battle against an enemy. So they viewed Paul as a threat and were taking up positions against him.

And the second word used here, translated in the ESV as “reviled” is the Greek word “blasphemeo” and is where we get our word “to blaspheme” from. David Guzik points out in his commentary on this passage that since one can only blaspheme God, this is in direct connection to their rejection of the gospel message that Paul preached to them, namely, that Jesus Christ is the Messiah and that God raised him from the dead. So they weren’t casually rejecting Paul’s message in a “live and let live” kind of manner, but they were violently opposed to it and were outright asking for God to curse Paul as a blasphemer.

I think this is why we see such a demonstrative response from Paul. The text goes on to say, “He shook out his garments and said, ‘Your blood is on your own heads. I’m moving on to the Gentiles.’” It was a sign that Paul had shared the message Jesus and fulfilled the responsibility God had given him. He was now not responsible for those who had refused to believe the message of the gospel. Same is true for us. But even still, this must have been discouraging for Paul. Time and time again, in every city that went to, a large number of the Jews, his countrymen, had rejected him.

Well even though most of the Jews end up rejecting him, he nevertheless makes some progress among the Jewish community in Corinth. The text tells us that after he was run out of the synagogue, Paul began to meet in the house of one Tit-ti-us Justus, a God Worshipper mostly likely meaning he was a Jewish convert who had heard Paul speak and had become convinced of the gospel. And his house just happened to be right next door to the synagogue. V. 8 tells us that even “Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed in the Lord, together with his entire household.” That’s pretty incredible. The leader of the synagogue in Corinth embraced the gospel through Paul’s witness. And, apparently, this was not only happening in the Jewish community but the verse goes on to tell us that “many others (Gentiles included) that came to believe in Jesus and be baptized.” So, things were happening in Corinth, wonderful things. The gospel was moving forward. There was progress being made.

And yet...Paul was discouraged and probably feeling a little sorry for himself or we might say, having a pity party. How do we know that he was discouraged? It’s not plain in the text, but we can deduce from the fact that God had to appear to him in a vision recorded in vs. 9-10 in order to encourage him, as a sign that he needed it. Also, we get a sense of his discouragement later on in his ministry when he writes his first letter back to this same Corinthian church, when he talks about how much he was struggling during his time in Corinth. He says in 1 Cor. 2:1-3, “And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom....I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling.” The cumulative effect of all of the persecution Paul had faced was probably beginning to catch up with him, leaving him feeling weary and worn-out. Again, everybody has limits, and Paul was getting very close to his limit of what he could endure. Also, remember that, despite the leader of the Corinthian synagogue embracing the gospel, most of the Jews in Corinth rejected it. And, as Paul knew all too well by now, that probably meant there would soon be a riot and a public beating and jail time and perhaps even an attempt on his life. It had become too

predictable. So, it's actually understandable that Paul was battling discouragement. Paul was ready to move on to the next city and had all but given up on Corinth but God had not.

And God meets Paul right where he is at, in the middle of this discouragement and despair and encourages Paul with his promises. Look at vs. 9-10: [Read] These verses communicate to us the main idea of the entire passage. First, God says to Paul, "Do not be afraid." The implication behind this message was that Paul was afraid, fearing that here in Corinth his work would be cut short and his physical well being was once again in jeopardy. The solution to Paul's fear was for him to obey Jesus' command to not be afraid; and "to speak and not keep silent," that is, to keep preaching the gospel. And in vs. 10, he gives the promise of his presence when he says, "I am with you." In other words, God is saying to Paul, "I know you're weak... I know that you're struggling... I know your circumstances feel like more than what you can handle, but I am with you." This promise was the basis for God's command to not be afraid and to keep preaching the gospel.

And, of course, this promise is not just for Paul but for all of us as followers of Jesus. In Matthew 28:18-20, after Jesus commands us to go and make disciples, he tells us the very same thing he told Paul: "And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." And that's one of the most important things for us to remember as we live our lives on mission telling the world about Jesus, because there will be some very difficult days. There will be times when we feel fearful and anxious, as Paul apparently felt as he thought about what kinds of challenges might face in Corinth. We might also feel weak and overwhelmed and discouraged. Yet, that's okay, as Paul discovered when he wrote in 2 Cor. 12:9, "I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me." It all comes back to this understanding that God is with us. No matter what we face, he's by our side every step of the way, giving us strength, fighting our battles, and using us to accomplish his perfect purposes.

God then assures Paul that "no one will attack you to harm you." Now, the immediate application here is for Paul while he's in Corinth. Even though people had attacked and harmed Paul in many of the previous cities he visited, God is promising him that that won't happen here as we see play out later in the text that we will get to in a moment.

Yet even though the immediate application of this promise was for Paul in Corinth, this promise that "no one will attack you to harm you" can also be applied more broadly to all believers, as well. As long as God the Father sits on the throne of heaven sovereignly reigning over all things, and as long as Jesus is seated at his right hand as our Intercessor and Advocate, and as long as the Holy Spirit dwells within us leading, guiding and sustaining us in our faith, then no harm can come to us other than what our good and loving God allows and we are eternally secure.

You see, the greatest "harm" that could ever come upon us is us receiving the judgment our sins deserve. But the Bible tells us that Jesus took that judgment on himself when he died on the cross. He suffered the full measure of God's wrath so that we wouldn't have to and then God raised him from the dead as a demonstration of his victory over sin and death once and for all. As a result, Romans 8:1 tells us that "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

So the question we all need to ask ourselves is this, "Am I 'in Christ Jesus'? Have I repented and turned away from my sin and put my trust in Christ alone as my only hope of salvation?" If so, then we can have the confidence that nothing will ever cause us any eternal harm. This must have been an incredible encouragement to Paul. And what courage and confidence that should give us to know that, in Christ, we are secure.

Then God finishes his encouragement to Paul by reminding him of his purpose. The Lord says to him in the final part of verse 10, “for I have many in this city who are my people.” God had a purpose to save many more people in that city, and nothing could thwart that purpose. Even though Paul may have been discouraged and thinking of leaving, God had more for Paul to do in Corinth and we’re told that Paul spent a year and a half there preaching the gospel.

And this assurance keeps Paul motivated for ministry. And the assurance of God’s purpose should do the same for us. I believe this promise is still true today, and I believe that it’s true for us right here in our communities. God has said, “I have many in this city.” Do you believe that’s true? Do you believe that there are still those in our communities who are his who have not yet believed? Do you know how I know that this is true? Because we are still here. This church has been faithfully preaching the gospel for over 160 years. And I believe, as we continue to live our lives on mission, God still has a purpose for us to exist here in our community. We still have a job to do. So, if we truly believe that then let’s go. Let’s continue to reach people where they are at with the good news of the gospel that they might be saved. God is with us and he has a purpose. What better assurances could we ask for?

As we finish up this morning, we see that although Paul wasn’t physically harmed, he still faced prosecution. In vs. 12-16, we see that the Jews bring Paul court before the Roman Proconsul Gallio with accusations that his ministry goes against Roman law. But God gives Paul favor with Gallio so that Gallio dismisses the case without Paul even having to speak one word defending himself. What a clear picture of how God shows himself faithful as the one defending and protecting Paul just as he promised he’d do. Again, God had more for Paul to do in Corinth and nothing was going to stop his purposes. There is a great peace and knowing God is in complete control.

Although Paul is spared from physical harm we see the Ruler of the Synagogue was not. In a ploy to get the proconsul’s attention, the crowd grabs poor Sosthenes in vs. 17 and they publicly beat him to no avail as we’re told Gallio simply ignores them. We don’t know a lot about poor Sosthenes other than what we’re told here in our text that he was the ruler of the synagogue. But remember this was the title that was held by Crispus earlier in our text today. Either Crispus had resigned from this position willfully or he was kicked out but it’s a reminder that when we come to Jesus we are new creations and we are not what we once were.

If we take a step back and think about it, this passage shows us that there’s always going to be a temptation to disengage from our mission to sharing the gospel with people. Paul’s life is an example of what any faithful Christian already knows to be true, that consistently sharing the gospel with people isn’t easy. It’s not easy to live our life on mission. It requires an incredible amount of effort and energy and endurance. The temptation will always be there to let off the gas pedal and gradually start allowing ourselves to coast and eventually make only half-hearted efforts at sharing the gospel, if we even do so at all. If we’re being honest, I think that’s where a lot of us at today.

But, there’s not a doubt in my mind that Jesus has the same message for us in this church as he had for Paul, “I have many in this city who are my people... Do not be afraid...for I am with you.” And we’re the ones he’s called to reach them with the life-saving message of the gospel. So let’s be encouraged today through the promises of God to be the church on mission. Let’s pray.

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen” – Romans 15:13