

## *Fear and Trembling*

Acts 18:1-17

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This morning we turn to the Book of Acts 18:1-17, as Paul is getting ready to wrap up his second missionary journey of three. Next week, we will look at his time in Ephesus. This time, however, in Corinth was one of the longest that he spent in any area. He will spend a year and a half in Corinth. It would comprise the largest, at least percentage, of his writing. His letters to the Corinthian church would take up the largest percentage of his ink. This time that he spent in Corinth, and the relationships created there, and the challenges encountered there were very great and go to the very heart of the gospel, and goes to the very heart of his own calling. We turn now to this important section of his journey, as we look together at what he encounters there. So let's look together at this wonderful section, where we understand that Paul works out his own salvation, and his calling, and fear and trembling in the midst of great challenge. Acts chapter eighteen.

After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. 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, and because he was of the same trade he stayed with them and worked, for they were tentmakers by trade. And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and tried to persuade Jews and Greeks.

When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, Paul was occupied with the word, testifying to the Jews that the Christ was Jesus. 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." 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. 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. And the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, "Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, 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." And he stayed a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.

But when Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews made a united attack on Paul and brought him before the tribunal, saying, "This man is persuading people 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 wrongdoing or vicious crime, O Jews, I would have reason to accept your complaint. But since it is a matter of questions about words and names and your own law, see to it yourselves. I refuse to be a judge of these things." And he drove them from the tribunal. And they all seized Sosthenes, the ruler of the synagogue, and beat him in front of the tribunal. But Gallio paid no attention to any of this.

That's what you call a bad day at the office – a really, really bad day. What in the world would God have us to learn from this passage? I have no idea. Because that's not up to me. God will bring his Word to bear. May he call us to a greater vision and greater trust in the One who is our Provider, the Lord Jesus Christ. Pray with me.

Father, we thank you that we come before you as people who are open-handed – or at least, we should be – desiring that you would teach us, desiring that you would lead us, to give us a vision for what it means to trust in the Lord Jesus Christ and be called radically into a new way, not just of thinking, not just of doing, but our entire being transformed. Would you do this? For those who are Christians, Lord, I pray that you would continually save them. Redeem us. For those who are not believers, Lord, I pray that you would call them. Call them to account. Call them to repentance. Call them to trust in you. Lord, I pray that you would prepare us to celebrate the Lord's supper, which is something that we can take into our hands and put into our mouth that is the symbol of what Christ has done for us, who is the bread of life, whose blood is like wonderful wine that will satisfy our deepest thirst, because his blood makes us clean. Lord, prepare us for that celebration. Now prepare us by hearing from your Word. In Jesus' name. Amen.

So, my apologies to you at the outset, but at least I'm warning you. If you have a pen, there is going to be a point between the two that you have written there for you. So, there's city to city. Secondly, the second point, of course, is going to be stumbling block. That's what should have been there. And then thirdly, do not be silent. So it's city to city; stumbling block; do not be silent. I'm addicted to three points. Pray for me, as you pray for Presbyterian ministers everywhere, that God would release us from the three point paradigm. But there you go. So I sent in my outline, I was away in Boston, and God had other plans. So there we go. Let's go together.

City to city. Paul was in Athens, a tremendously difficult time. As you recall, he was not invited to give an argument for what he was teaching. He was dragged before the Aeropagus, as it were, like we before the DMV looking for our license. He was dragged before them and asked the question, essentially, why should we give you a license to teach any of this babbling on that you are, about these multiple gods that you are teaching? Paul proclaimed Christ in a might way – in a confronting way. But he would spend a little bit of time there. But he would leave, and now he goes to Corinth, thirty-seven miles away.

Why Corinth? Why go from Athens to Corinth? Two very, very different cities. Athens was a lot like Boston – a place of many universities, a place of various kinds of worship, a marketplace, a place that had people coming from all over the world trading ideas, but really consumed with ideas. It's interesting as you ride on the subway in Boston how many advertisements for a countless number of universities and institutions of higher learning. Everybody tries to sell you less on products, but more on ideas. Very different than New York. New York's subway is full of – buy this product or that. Yes, products are being sold on the tea of Boston, but really it's the marketplace of ideas. But not so Corinth.

Imagine Corinth being like Las Vegas, were it in Miami. Miami is not Las Vegas, but I would assure you that, imagine Las Vegas – where supposedly, everything that happens here stays here, but it were on the ocean. Imagine if Las Vegas was on the point of an isthmus where you have on one side a great sea like the Adriatic, and on the other side the Aegean Sea. And it's very easy to cross over this isthmus by foot. It's a place of great promiscuity, great trade for sure. This is the place that was Corinth. It had two great seas on either side, two great ports. It was centered around a mountain, and at the top of that mountain was the temple to Aphrodite, the goddess of love. Love. You can read just a few chapters into Paul's letters to the Corinthians, and you notice that there's great concern for the ways in which they're using their bodies. That's because, in Corinth, the way you used your body – anything goes. Place of great sexual promiscuity. This is what made up Corinth.

So Paul goes there in a desire to preach the gospel. It's not that other small places are unimportant, but there's a reason why Paul is going from city to city. Because at that time, great influence -- as is the case today -- much of the cultural, intellectual influence comes from our various cities around

the world. It's the concentration of people living in a very small space. I haven't been for any length of time, at least since living in metro New York, in a place that was so cramped like a place that is Boston. The place where I was staying said it was on a busy street. Yes. Every morning, awakening to Bostonians' frustration with traffic – sirens and horns, yelling, subways, and traffic. There's a reason why Paul goes to Corinth. It's because taking the gospel there means that the gospel goes from there and will emanate outward. He was very intentional, purposeful, for where he was going. He was not indiscriminate. He went there with a point.

Question for us is: is our understanding for where we share the gospel indiscriminate, or is it purposeful? Is the place where God has you just merely by coincidence? Has God placed you at your address, or did you think of the place where you would live just by happenstance? Or do you recognize, if you are a Christian, that we ought to be thinking purposefully the places where we're going? Because in so doing, as our faith is brought to bear in all of life – where you work, where you live, where you play – ought to have a purpose to it, and that purpose is greater than the immediate enjoyment. While enjoyment may be experienced, the purpose for the Christian is to recognize that our purpose is to make Him known, that we might grow in faith, that we might show the love of Christ to the world. And that ought to be done with not indiscriminate planning, but with purpose. Think about it for just a moment.

I had the wonderful blessing of being able to meet with one of our own this past week, Taylor Craig, as he's at MIT in Cambridge. We met at a small café, and then after we were there for a couple of hours, I decided to walk the campus of MIT. And you're just able to walk through the buildings, and nobody asked me, "Why are you here?" It's really fun, actually. And so as I'm walking through their main student center, and just the massive brain power that's represented by such an institution like MIT – you think about, what does the gospel look like in a place like this? And should I just be indiscriminate and get up on the nearest couch and just begin preaching Christ? Taylor and I discussed that.

What does proclaiming Christ look like? It ought to be with a plan. While, yes, I'm completely free to get up on the nearest picnic table that's not covered with unfrozen snow in the middle of MIT and just begin preaching the gospel – I can be a faithful witness to Jesus by preaching the gospel indiscriminately. The question is: should I consider the purpose of my task and whether that task will perhaps put me in the way of greatest effectiveness? May I ask that questions? Yes, I am called to give a faithful witness to Jesus Christ wherever I am and in what I'm doing, but I ought to do so with purpose, recognizing that if I get onto a picnic table in the middle of Harvard Square or MIT, I might be faithful in my witness, but I also might be doing so, so indiscriminately that I am deaf and blind to how that is not the best way to proclaim Christ in that context. Are we purposeful? Are we thinking about the purpose? Paul demonstrates he did. And we should consider, how are we living with purpose in the gospel?

But he goes, as was his practice, to the synagogue in Corinth. And there, he encountered a stumbling block for the Jews. That stumbling block for the Jews, we learn here – as he is very specific, Luke recounts in verse five, "When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, Paul was occupied with the Word." He wasn't occupied with himself. He was occupied with declaring the Word of God, as it was, the Old Testament. And then it goes further. He "was occupied with the Word, testifying to the Jews that the Christ" – you can imagine as he would have referred to the Old Testament, going back to Ezekiel or Isaiah or Jeremiah, hearing and proclaiming of the Messiah, the one who would come to redeem Israel, he says, that is the Christ, that is the Messiah. Now the question is, who is this Christ? Who is the Messiah? And he takes a straight line from the Old Testament prophecies straight to Christ. And it says, "He proclaimed Christ as Jesus."

But we learn that, verse six, that “When they opposed him and reviled him, he shook out his garments and he said to them, ‘Your blood be on your heads.’” First, he discovered very quickly – and this was a cause for great hurt for Paul. Not personally, in terms of his identity as a human being – great hurt, because he was hurt by the fact that he constantly was running up against the opposition to the thing that is most central to the gospel. The gospel’s greatest strength is not shown in human power, human manipulation, human taking hold of the normal tools of power to manipulate and control behavior of others or to force them into his box. Rather, the power of the gospel is in the weakness that it shows. And when he proclaimed the gospel, the Christ as Jesus, in doing so he would do so by proclaiming the cross as the means through which God redeems human beings. And when he does that, we know that the Jews saw the cross as a curse. There is no way that the Messiah, the Christ, would become so through the pathway of a curse. And therein lies both the power of the gospel, but also its greatest stumbling block – that God would not just become human like us, but that he would become a curse for us.

The Bible is clear that one who is dying on a cross is considered by God a curse. Why would God do this? Because God would send himself to the point of greatest weakness before human beings, so that he could see us through his Son becoming a curse, so that we would not be called cursed. Jesus became a curse so that we would not be called cursed, without hope, without redemption. God died on a cross. That is the stumbling block. That is the opposition.

And when we are honest, at our greatest center of ourselves, we find it hard to imagine and to even think about centering our lives around something the rest of the world considers utter weakness or foolishness. But in that, God demonstrates his power, because there then we are no longer centered on who we are. And if we’re no longer centered on who we are or what we do, no one can shake us. You see? Because if we are centered on his power, his definition of victory, then this is why Paul would say, if God is for us, who or what can be against us? Nothing can shake us. Nothing can separate us from the love of God.

Therefore, if I can not be bought, if I cannot be shaken, then I become not the weakest, but I become the most powerful. Why? Because it’s not in me. You have to deal with my Savior. You might disagree with me – fine and good – but I’m not at issue here. Jesus is at issue here. He calls Paul to preach and to live out what would be a stumbling block, because in that, Paul gives them and calls them to radical repentance, what is the true power to change. He is rolling out for them a new way of life that is not centered on what we do or who we are, but who he is and who He has made us to be. He takes us and gives us a grand vision for life that is beyond what my hands can provide for myself. This is what he offers to you. He’s offering you and me a vision, a new life.

But we know that they did not want to hear him. They refused him. And so what does Paul do? Paul says, okay. He does something that only one can do when you are centered on the weakness of God defined by the world, that is, the greatest strength. Here’s what it is. He can now say, I do not have the responsibility for converting you. I do not have the power to change you. What I can say is, that is now your responsibility. My responsibility was to proclaim Christ and him crucified for your sins and salvation, to present him as the only one in whom life can be found. But that is my only job, is to witness it and witness to it. But it’s your responsibility as to whether you will receive it. And so he shakes off his coat and his garment which was, for that time and age, a way of saying, good luck with that. You have not received me. Now you need to know, you’ve made a choice.

You’re free to make the choice, but you’re not free to choose the consequences. We are free to choose, are we not? David was free to choose his sin with Bathsheba, but he wasn’t free to choose the

consequences. God would say, the sword will never depart from your house. Moses was free to choose – strike this rock only once, Moses. But he struck it twice in his frustration. And God said, you're free to choose, but the consequences will be you will not lead my people into the Promised Land. David and Moses went to the grave and are in the hall of faith – Hebrews chapter eleven – they went to the grave believers. They went to the grave with grace. They went to the grave with salvation. But there were consequences for their choices, and Paul is now putting it on to his hearers as I am called to do with you.

This is Christ, the cursed Son of God, that we might become children of the King and to know life, and know it to the full. And you this morning are called to choose: is that a gift you want to receive? Know this: I have come to the place, and I hope you can, that I'm completely okay in terms of my responsibility whether you choose to receive that gift or not. I can't argue you into the kingdom. I can't point you to any conclusive evidence beyond a shadow of a doubt, the only proof that Jesus is real. I can give you all the Lord's supper and baptism and the Word and all these great arguments, but that's not proof. But a day is coming when all that has been said will be seen for what is truth and what is false. That is what my Lord tells me in his Word. And as Paul says to his audience, the question is: will you receive the blood of Christ as your salvation? Or will you receive your own blood on your own head? The responsibility is yours. I pray, I desire, for us to be able to find our sense of life and godliness and power and beauty in Christ alone. I pray that for me. I pray that for you. Question is: what are we going to do with the call? That's on you, as it is on me.

Finally, do not be silent. Paul receives a vision from the Lord, and it says to him: "Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, 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." The Lord tells Paul—as he told Moses, as he told Joshua, as he told David—go, and I will be with you. What an incredible freedom. He says to him, I'll be with you. There's going to be attack, but they will not harm you. In this space, in this Corinth. Doesn't mean it's always applicable to everyone, but in this moment, he says to Paul, this is what I want you to go and do. Go and do this. There will be no harm to come to you.

And then what took place? What took place is the most unlikely of conversions. Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, his entire family. Incredibly upheaval. And other Gentiles – he went next door. Imagine that. The synagogue and then the house next door. Great conversion, great opposition in the synagogue. Do you think that would have caused problem in the community? You bet it would. And so Paul, in shaking off his garment and saying, that's your responsibility – they say, here's our responsibility, and they try to use power against Paul. Paul says, that's your responsibility. And they say, oh no, you're our responsibility. And they drag him before the proconsul. And what happens? Gallio says, you know what? I want no part of this. That's yours. They're meeting all kinds of road blocks. And they attempt – and God stays true to his promise, you will be attacked but they will not harm you.

Here's what jumps out. Two things – application points. One: God will accomplish his promises indirectly through Roman law. God did not intervene in some massive way, through an archangel, and keep him protected. Rather, he used Roman law as to be the defense mechanism to protect Paul, to allow him to continue to preach. This is an incredible thing that we see as God working. He doesn't always directly intervene. Rather, he sets things up and allows things to take place and to unfold as an indirect way of providing for his people. Look for God in indirect ways. God has a habit of showing up in the most odd of places.

But there's a second thing. We are called to be purposeful and thoughtful about where and when we share the gospel. Secondly, we need to recognize that the gospel that we witness to is bound up in

earthly weakness, but empowered by divine holiness and glory. So we need to be careful and aware that when we preach Christ, we are witnessing to weakness. And no amount of proof and argument is going to be able to prove that this is the greater way. We can't prove it. We're only called to witness to Christ.

But there's one final thing, and it's this—that when he says to Paul, do not be silent, do not be afraid, do you see, he's calling Paul and giving him the liberty to witness and to not be liked. The liberty was to witness, but also not be liked. Imagine if Paul were so bound up in people-pleasing that he shaved the gospel just a little bit. But because he was bound up in the power of God, the weakness of the cross that gave him freedom to freely witness, the liberty, he also recognized that his job wasn't to get people to like him, but to see Christ. Isn't that precisely what Jesus did? He proclaimed himself. He witnessed to the divinity and the power and the grace and the love of God, but he was willing not to be liked. It didn't mean he was disagreeable. It didn't mean he wasn't loving. He just wasn't afraid of the fact that what he was doing would be so disruptive.

Sometimes we're scared to preach the gospel because we're afraid that it's going to be so disruptive that people won't like us. It's so tempting. But know this—that when we are tempted, we are going after a power that is only culturally defined and will not bring us the greatest sense of what God has called us to be—to be a people that are so free to love and to witness to Christ, but also weak enough in ourselves, strong enough in the world, to know that you may not like me for witnessing to him, but that's okay. I love you anyway. I want you to see Jesus. This is what is on offer to us. This is what the Lord calls us to. May the Lord equip us.

And as we are equipped, we're going to do so through the Lord's supper this morning—because we're hungry, we're thirsty. We're tempted to go back to the old wells of trying to get other people to like us—to get to the old wells of power and hope that we can convince and argue people into the kingdom. But the Lord draws us to the weakness of God in symbol of bread and juice, that the greatest power of all is seen in the greatest and weakest act, according to man, that God died cursed but was raised victorious that we might have life. Life to the full. Full to witness, free to love, but liberated to find a foundation that cannot be shaken in Christ alone. Let's pray.

Father, feed us. Feed us, we pray, that we might be faithful witnesses to Christ. Do this by your strength, drawing us again to the table—the table of human weakness but divine power—for our salvation. And may it be for your glory. In Jesus' name. Amen.