

DON'T BE AFRAID, KEEP ON SPEAKING!

by Steve Zeisler

Acts 18 starts with this sentence: "After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth." That is a very matter-of-fact statement, without a lot of detail. The journey from Athens to Corinth was about fifty miles long. It was a good road.

But we know from elsewhere in the New Testament that this trip was made under very difficult circumstances. First Corinthians, a letter written to the church in Corinth after it was founded, describes Paul's state of mind as he entered the city for the first time (2:1-3): "When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling." It was a fearful man walking alone who made this trip from Athens to Corinth.

In Athens by himself, Paul was burdened within, and he began out of this provocation of spirit to preach in the synagogue, then in the agora, and finally at the Areopagus. He had asked his friends to go back to the churches they had founded in Macedonia and care for the saints there. And having left Athens still burdened in spirit, he began this trek to Corinth. He was fearful, depressed, and trembling as he approached the city.

We can imagine such a condition. Most of us at some time in our life have been alone, unsure of what God was doing with us, and emotionally vulnerable. Some of the most poignant accounts in Scripture are of those occasions when some man or woman is alone, struggling to trust God under difficult circumstances, and finding that they are overwhelmed emotionally.

Perhaps we can imagine what it was like for Abraham to have bound and quieted his son, laid him on an altar, and lifted his knife to sacrifice him in obedience to the Lord. Not knowing God's purpose makes these kinds of difficulties especially tough.

David had to flee from Saul and live in caves, abandoned, as far as he knew, by people and feeling abandoned by God. Many of the anguished psalms David wrote came from his times alone. Daniel was thrown into a den of lions to be executed, left by himself. Elijah ran from the threats of Jezebel and complained to God of being left alone.

Perhaps the most poignant of all was Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, when the Father rejected his plea to be spared and his companions fell asleep.

That was essentially Paul's condition as he traveled from Corinth to Athens. He was alone and scared, he'd been through a great deal of difficulty, and he was wondering what was before him.

Let's briefly recall what we know that Paul had been through to this point. He was stoned and left for dead in Lystra. Then he was challenged by Christians from Jerusalem who accused him of being a false teacher. Later, on the second missionary journey, he went to Philippi, where he was beset by a mob, beaten with rods, clapped into jail, locked in stocks, and left to suffer what fate he had no idea, as midnight drew near and the earth quaked. He went on to Thessalonica and was attacked by his countrymen in another mob scene and driven out of the city. They continued their opposition in Berea. He finally came to Athens and preached in that great intellectual center, where he was derided and regarded as a fool.

Now Paul was trudging alone from Athens to Corinth---a city worse than any he had been to. Corinth was bigger than the places he'd been, more arrogant, more filled with sensuality and godlessness, richer, less spiritual. It was home to Jews who would be his antagonists as the Jews of Thessalonica had been; pseudo-intellectuals who would be too proud to listen to the genius of the apostle, as those in Athens had been; filled with materialism that surpassed anything he had faced in Philippi or anywhere else. And the unbridled

sensuality of Corinth was legendary throughout the Roman empire.

Needed friends

Although we will read about the vision of the Lord in our text here, we will wait to talk about it until the next message. Our purpose here will be to learn some other things about the needs of someone in circumstances like Paul's, someone who is alone and in difficulty, and about what God will do to provide for them there. Let's begin with verses 1-5:

After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all the Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them. Every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks.

When Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia, Paul devoted himself exclusively to preaching, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ.

Unlike at Athens, Paul didn't begin ministry out of a sense of being stirred by what he saw, probably because he was too depleted, too vulnerable to begin public ministry alone again. So he attended synagogue, and either in the synagogue or in the tent-making section of the marketplace, he met some Christian Jews named Aquila and Priscilla.

There is debate among scholars as to how this couple came to faith in Christ. Some say that Paul led them to faith after he met them here in Corinth. The better guess is that they met Christ in Rome, but retained their identity as Jews. It may have been that the argument that caused Caesar to banish Jews from Rome was over Christian presence among the Jews. In any case, Aquila and Priscilla were still meeting with the Jews in the synagogue in Corinth. When Paul met them, there was an instant bond between them because they shared faith in Christ.

If you were to think of a situation today that is similar to this one with Aquila and Priscilla, it might be meeting some wonderful Christian people who are members of an extremely liberal denomination, which has rejected most of what the gospel teaches and has lost faith that the Bible is reliable. There are Christians who really love Christ in many such denominations. They have drawn on the best parts of their heritage. They go to church every Sunday, and though there is little of Christ in the services, they find a way to open their heart to the Lord. They are growing and enthusiastic; they are becoming more mature. But they remain in a setting that is not particularly encouraging of such faith.

Another analogy that might make the same point is when people come to Christ in a twelve-step program. They have a tough background of some kind, bad habits of life. They enter the twelve-step program, hear of a Higher Power and so on, and fall in love with Jesus. Their faith is growing, and they are learning to walk with the Lord. They haven't yet taken the step into a real Christian church yet, but they are solid and loving Christian people who are in an environment that is not centered on Christ.

That is probably the best way to think about Aquila and Priscilla. They were Jewish Christians who loved the Lord and they were members of the synagogue. When Paul met them, they formed a great fellowship, and he stayed in their home. They are a wonderful example of a Christian husband and wife doing ministry together, and it will help us to consider them on that basis.

In verse 5 we're told that Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia. They almost certainly brought a gift of money from those churches. There are references made in Philippians 4 to the generosity of the Philippians. So Paul gave up his tent-making business because of the gift of money, and he began to do ministry full-time.

Blasphemy and sensitivity

Verses 6-11:

But when the Jews opposed Paul and became abusive, he shook out his clothes in protest and said to them, "Your blood be on your own heads! I am clear of my responsibility. From now on I will go to the Gentiles."

Then Paul left the synagogue and went next door to the house of Titius Justus, a worshiper of God. Crispus, the synagogue ruler, and his entire household believed in the Lord; and many of the Corinthians who heard him believed and were baptized.

One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: "Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city." So Paul stayed for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God.

Paul attempted to do ministry in the synagogue as he usually did. Eventually, it says, there was opposition to Paul that grew up. "...The Jews...became abusive...." The word is actually "blasphemed." Their abuse was not against Paul but against the One he spoke of. They became increasingly emotional and angry and were vilifying the name of Jesus. Finally when Paul couldn't stand it any longer, he took an action familiar around the Mediterranean world, shaking the dust out of his clothes. That said, "Enough with you! I want nothing left of this place on me, not even the dust that would cling to my clothes."

Then Paul did the most wonderful thing--he marched out the front door of the synagogue, turned right, took three steps, and walked into the house next door. A man named Titius Justus, who was a God-fearing Gentile, owned a building that probably shared a wall with the synagogue. Paul immediately began to teach the Bible next door to the synagogue. Because of the blasphemy and godless response of some of these Jews, the sensitive people in the congregation gave their hearts to the Lord, among them Crispus, leader of the synagogue and a Jew, and Titius Justus, who was probably a leader among the God-fearing Gentiles. They saw that it was God who was being resisted, that the apostle was telling the truth. So Paul began a teaching ministry that lasted a year and a half, and we're told that a great many in the city came to the Lord.

An important decision

Let's read verses 12-18, and then we'll make some application.

While Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews made a united attack on Paul and brought him into court. "This man," they charged, "is persuading the people to worship God in ways contrary to the law."

Just as Paul was about to speak, Gallio said to the Jews, "If you Jews were making a complaint about some misdemeanor or serious crime, it would be reasonable for me to listen to you. But since it involves questions about words and names and your own law---settle the matter yourselves. I will not be a judge of such things." So he had them ejected from the court. Then they all turned on Sosthenes the synagogue ruler and beat him in front of the court. But Gallio showed no concern whatever.

Paul stayed on in Corinth for some time.

Gallio was an interesting man. He is also known to us from Roman history. His brother was Seneca, the tutor of Nero. He rendered a very important decision here. Because he was an influential man, this decision had ramifications in other places in the empire.

When the Romans conquered people, they would give the right for reasonable local religions to be considered licit or legal religions. As long as the Romans had officially regarded a religion as legal, the adherents were allowed to practice it as long as they didn't directly challenge Roman authority. Judaism was a legal religion. Gallio decided that people who decided to call themselves Christians were part of Judaism. That meant that they were legal; he was not going to hassle them, and they had the right to practice their religion. If the Jews didn't get along, that was their problem. This decision had ramifications for at least a decade to follow in terms of the way the Romans would respond to the founding of churches.

Acceptance and encouragement

There are two general points of application that we can make, and a third regarding the vision in particular that we'll take up in the next message. The first point is the importance of community, relationships, and the ministry of other people, especially when one is lonely, depressed, depleted, and vulnerable. When Paul entered the city, God provided a home for him. We can't overestimate the importance of that. Priscilla and Aquila were willing to let him live with them and work with them. They fed him meals, put their arms around him, prayed with him. (He also had physical work to attend to that helped him go through the healing of the emotional struggle with which he had entered the city.)

God supplies other Christians for this purpose, and it is something that we need to take very seriously in this church. We need community, people who will accept us, the support of folks who love us just because we belong to Christ and they love him. We need places of acceptance and succor and support. We need to have places where people like you and I can walk in and take our shoes off, where our sense of humor is okay, where we're received gladly and cared about. Wonderfully, the Lord supplied that to Paul in Corinth. Aquila and Priscilla's home became his home.

There's a second aspect to the ministry of fellow believers in this account. When Timothy and Silas came from Macedonia, they said, "Paul, let's do ministry together." In the book of 1 Thessalonians, which Paul wrote from Corinth during this year and a half that he was there, he was effusive in his enthusiasm. "I sent Timothy to you when I was in Athens," he said, "and now he has come to me and given me a report." The church of Christ in Thessalonica was thriving and ministering, and Paul was depleted. It's uplifting to hear the stories of people in other places who are taking risks for Jesus' sake. And now Timothy was there to team up with him. Silas probably came from Philippi with a similar report. We know when Paul wrote to the Philippians after this, he said, "You were participants in the gospel from the first day until now." Philippi was home to another godly church, another one of the places where they took the Lord seriously, grew, struggled, cared, and honored Christ. With Silas and Timothy there, a sense of vitality came back.

But the healthiest environment of all is having these things combined--having a place where you'll be loved, people who are going to embrace you no matter what because you belong to Christ and they love him; and having brothers and sisters who will go to battle with you, who will say, "Come on, let's do the ministry together. Let's go out and talk of Jesus. Let's take on the forces of darkness in his name." (The gift of money from Philippi and Thessalonica was also very encouraging. Believers in other places were saying, "Paul, we want you to be able to work full-time in the service of the Lord.") When Christian communities are like that, deeply accepting and encouraging the use of one's gifts in serving, that's when life is as it ought to be. That's what breaks the back of discouragement and depression and gives us hope enough to make progress. When somebody loves us and somebody will serve with us, that combination is very powerful. That's what the Lord gave Paul in Corinth, and that's one of the great ways that he ministers to us when we're down. Other servants of his become part of his answer to our needs.

The good that God brings out of evil

The second point of application I want to call to your attention is the repeated reference, though subtle, to a truth that was articulated well by Joseph, after his brothers had asked his forgiveness for selling him into slavery in Egypt many years before. Joseph said to them, "You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good." There are a number of places in this story where the Sovereign of the universe, takes what some people mean to be harmful, and antagonistic to the cause of Christ, and brings good from it. Consider the banishment of Aquila and Priscilla from Rome. The Romans probably thought they were getting rid of a problem by dispersing these Jews, especially the ones who believed in Jesus as the Christ. The banishment from Rome brought believing people to Corinth at the time they were needed there.

Paul had to ask Silas and Timothy to go back to the churches they had started, and he stayed alone in Athens. It was very difficult and draining to be left by his friends. Yet the result was that the churches in these other places grew and flourished, and then when the brothers came back together, they had more encouragement to share than if they had stayed together.

The blasphemy of the Jews in the synagogue---so intense that Paul had to shake out his garments and refuse to come back because they were ridiculing the name of his Lord and Savior---led sensitive souls to faith in Christ. That is implied in this passage. It was the Jews' very antagonism to the news about Jesus that allowed people like Crispus and Titius Justus and others to see that they were wrong. And they found themselves more inclined to believe in Christ.

When the Jews brought Paul to trial before Gallio, apparently to crack down on him and his friends and make life difficult for them, it had the good result of making the Christian religion a legal one. For at least ten years the gospel had freedom in Roman society that it never would have had without this trial in Corinth.

Lastly, one of my favorite little asides in the Bible, which I smile about every time I read it, is found in 1 Corinthians 1:2. This looks like the most ordinary of greetings: "Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes, to the church of God in Corinth...." Remember where we left Sosthenes in the account in Acts 18? He was in front of Gallio and others being beaten up, probably by the Jews (it's not clear who the antecedent of the pronoun "they" is in verse 17), who had replaced Crispus with Sosthenes as the leader of the synagogue. Sometime later they said, "Paul is driving us crazy! Let's take him to court before Gallio." So they cheered Sosthenes on as he took Paul to court. But he blew the trial; Gallio sided with Paul. These Jews who had recently elected Sosthenes decided that he was a failure, and they were so furious with him that they beat him in front of all the Romans and everybody else.

Paul wrote this greeting to the Corinthians tongue in cheek, I'm sure: "Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes...." Sosthenes had become a Christian, probably because of the beating he received when he was opposing the Lord. He seemed to have decided, "That didn't work. I might as well join Paul as fight against him!" What was meant for evil by some, God meant for good.

And this story is filled with such references. It must finally have ministered to Paul's heart to realize that although at times he was alone, rejected, laughed at, and made to suffer, the earliest Christians counted it an honor to suffer for the name of Christ. In the long run, the Lord Jesus, who was superintending everything, would bring good out of what was harmful. The death of Jesus led to his resurrection, life from the dead. In weakness is strength. What was intended for evil, God intends for good.

That's where we're going to leave this story today, encouraged I hope, in two ways: First, we should be encouraged to take community seriously as one of the ways that God is going to minister to people who have needs, supplying them with brothers and sisters who will care for them. And second, we should be encouraged to remember that we serve a Lord who will overturn what was intended to hurt and make it a source of help for us.

I'd like to conclude with the words we began with in 1 Corinthians 2, where Paul talks about what it felt like to come to Corinth for the first time. This time I'll include verse 4: "When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power."

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