

The Gospel Advances

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Date: 15 August 2021

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[0 : 00] As I have moved to D.C. and started working here. This morning we continue our study in the book of Acts, and we're looking at this morning Acts chapter 18.

Sarah Zylstra from the Gospel Coalition tells this story of Nima Ali Sada, an Iranian Christian. She writes, In 2018, four Christians were sentenced to 10 years in prison.

In this post-revolution context, Nima grew up in a nominal Muslim family trying to practice Islamic ways of worship because at school and in society you're forced to follow Islam. But he knew it wasn't working.

Still, when his uncle became a Christian, it was a massive shock to his whole family. The uncle lived in California, and the next time he came to visit Tehran, Nima asked him about it. And he said, I thought Christianity was for Western culture, and Islam was for the Eastern culture.

Why did you change your religion? So his uncle explained the good news about Jesus, which wasn't the way that Nima had heard about it in school. And Nima said, Right then, I believed everything he said.

[1 : 51] I was so thirsty to hear the truth. My eyes and ears were opened, and I had this massive conviction in my heart. This was it. This was what I was looking for. I was born to hear this. This morning, as we continue in the book of Acts, let me just recap where we've been.

The book of Acts is a book written by the gospel writer Luke, and it is a story. He's telling the story of how the church, after the resurrection of Jesus, grew. In the first chapter of Acts, Jesus gives this missional charge to the disciples in Acts 1.8, and he says, You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in Judea and in Samaria and into the ends of the earth.

And as we go throughout the book of Acts, this is what we see. We see not only the geographic but the ethnic spread of the gospel from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria and to most of the entire known Roman world.

And this morning, we come to Acts 18, where we continue Paul's second missionary journey. And if you've been following along, you might notice that we're skipping Acts 17. Mostly because last year, Tommy did a seven-part series in Acts 17, which is a really rich passage.

And so I just want to encourage you, if you didn't listen to that, to go back and check that out, because it's a really good series. But in this section of Paul's second missionary journey, like many other places in Acts, he gets a mixed response.

[3 : 18] Paul experiences both gospel fruit, and he also experiences opposition. And so the question that I want to ask this morning is this. How does the gospel advance despite opposition?

How does the gospel advance despite opposition? This is a question, I think, that can help us understand this chapter, but I think it can also help us understand our mission as a church today.

So first of all, we're going to see two things. First, we're going to see that the gospel advances through evangelism rooted in the sovereignty of God. And secondly, it advances through discipleship rooted in the Word of God.

So first of all, the gospel advances through evangelism rooted in the sovereignty of God. I think, understandably, when we hear this word evangelism, sometimes it can feel uncomfortable or we might misunderstand it.

And I think that it can make us feel uncomfortable for a couple reasons, and I think it's because of how we imagine it. I think we might imagine it in a lot of different ways.

[4 : 23] I think some of us might imagine evangelism as forced, awkward conversation about religion, which makes me uncomfortable too. And then others of us might imagine it as an extreme version of cultural imperialism, maybe one religion trying to force its culture on another.

But what the Bible teaches and what this text shows us today is that evangelism is neither of those things. It's neither forced, awkward conversation about religion. It's not cultural or imperialism. The word evangelism comes from the Greek word euangelion, which is actually where we get our word gospel. Anytime you see the word gospel in the New Testament, that's the word. And the word means good news.

It means good news. And in particular, it means the good news about the death and the resurrection of Jesus. And so in that sense, we're all evangelists about something. We're all evangelists about something.

Anytime we share good news or anytime we share about something we love. For about the past month or so, I have been an evangelist for my new favorite TV show, Ted Lasso.

[5 : 28] I've been talking about it. I've been quoting it. I've been telling other people to watch it. And good news, season two just came out. So that's good news. But here in Acts 18, Paul travels.

He was in Athens in Acts 17. He travels about 45 miles west in the city of Corinth to share the good news of the gospel. And in Corinth, he meets Aquila and Priscilla, two Jewish believers who have fled Rome because of an edict of the emperor Claudius.

And Aquila and Priscilla, as the story goes on, end up becoming two of his most important missionary colleagues. And Luke tells us that Paul stays with them, working for some time as tent makers to earn a living.

And then verse 4 tells us that every Sabbath, Paul went to the synagogue and reasoned with both Jews and Greeks. And this is, again, another clue that evangelism is not what we think.

We see Paul reasoning and dialoguing and discussing with people from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. If you see the different ways that Paul shares the gospel throughout the book of Acts, I think you'll notice at least four things about what it means to share the gospel.

[6 : 43] That sharing the gospel involves at least four things. First, it involves loving people by listening to their hopes, longings, fears, and sufferings.

Acts 17 is a great study of this. Paul, when he gets to the city, he comes into Athens and he walks around the city and he sees, he notices, and he observes the culture. And he sees that the city is full of idols.

Paul listens first. He observes. He notices. Secondly, sharing the gospel involves dialoguing with people about how they are seeking to address those things.

About how they're seeking to address their hopes, longings, and fears. Again, in Acts 17, Paul begins his sermon by saying, Man of Athens, I can see that you are very religious.

I can see that you care about finding meaning and purpose and transcendence in your life, and that you are doing something to address those things.

[7 : 44] It involves dialoguing with people about how they're addressing their longings, hopes, and fears. Third, it involves patiently offering a reason to critique where there might be some inconsistency.

And this is where the reasoning, the discussing, the dialoguing comes in that we see here in Acts 18. Another example of this in Acts 17 is when Paul says, he offers this critique and he says, Do you think that the God who made heaven and earth, the God who made all things, would live in a temple made by human hands?

Like, does that make rational sense? Does that make logical sense? He poses this question as a critique, a rational critique. Fourth and finally, sharing the gospel involves showing how the good news of Jesus offers a story that is more beautiful, that is truer, that is better.

Paul says in Acts 17, I see that you worship an unknown God, and what you worship as unknown, now I am going to proclaim to you. And I am going to quote your own poets to proclaim to you the message of Jesus, because the gospel is the fulfillment of not only your deepest longings and hopes, but of the deepest longings and hopes of your culture.

This is what we are called to do as witnesses in our neighborhoods, in our workplaces, in our friendships. This is the work of evangelism, not forced conversation, not cultural imperialism, but loving, humble, patient, reasoned dialogue.

[9 : 16] But no matter how patient or kind or warm we are in our evangelism, we may still, like Paul, experience opposition. Maybe you've experienced this from family or friends or coworkers.

There are certain cases of the persecuted church around the country, including the church in Iran, that experiences this. And this is what Paul experiences in verse 6.

The people in the synagogue force him to leave. Luke tells us that they oppose him and they revile him. Verses 12 through 17 give us another instance of opposition, where some of the people in the synagogue actually bring Paul to court.

They bring a case before Galileo, the Roman proconsul. And Galileo dismisses the case. He says, this has to do with your religion, not Roman law. But still, it shows the kind of hostility and opposition that Paul was facing.

And so what does he do in response? Verse 6 tells us that he shook his garments and he said, your blood be on your own heads. I am innocent. From now on, I will go to the Gentiles.

[10:20] It's a way of symbolically saying, I've done all I can do here. I'm no longer accepting responsibility. I'm moving on. I'm no longer considering myself responsible to take the gospel to you.

And this doesn't mean that Paul is no longer concerned with sharing the gospel with Jews. It just means that he is shifting the focus of his ministry in Corinth. We know this because he does a similar thing in other cities, like in Acts chapter 13, where a similar thing happens.

But we also know this because two verses later in verse 8, Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, the head leader of the synagogue, a Jew, hears Paul's message about Jesus and believes.

Crispus and his whole household and many of the Corinthians in the city believe the gospel and are baptized. Later in the service, we're going to have the joy of seeing two children in our congregation baptized.

And for those who might be less familiar with why we would baptize young children, among many other reasons in terms of how we think about the biblical story and how the Old Testament and New Testament fit together, this is one of several passages in Acts where we see not just individuals, but entire households being baptized.

[11:39] We see throughout Scripture, from the Old Testament throughout to the New Testament, that God brings his salvation not just to individuals, but to whole families and households. And so Paul sees some success in people coming to faith in Corinth.

He sees some people being baptized, but he also experiences opposition. So how does he persevere? How does the gospel continue to advance despite opposition?

In verses 9 through 11, we have one of the most amazing moments in the entire book of Acts.

Jesus himself appears to Paul in a dream and he says, It's this amazing statement of the sovereign presence of the Lord in Paul's ministry.

These words, Do not be afraid, I am with you, would have rang in Paul's ear, because these are words that are all over the Old Testament. God spoke them to Moses when he was in the wilderness.

He spoke them to Joshua before entering the promised land. He spoke them to Jeremiah when he called them to be a prophet. He spoke them to the whole nation of Israel in Deuteronomy 31 and Isaiah 41.

[12:56] And Jesus is saying to Paul in the midst of discouragement and opposition and fear, he's saying, In the same way that I was with Moses, in the same way that I was with Jeremiah, in the same way that I was with Joshua, in the same way that I was with the whole people of Israel, I am with you.

I am with you too. I am with you. Do not fear. Do not be silent. Do not be discouraged. Go on proclaiming the good news about my death and resurrection. Why? Because I have many people in the city who are my people.

Now this might sound strange to our modern ears, but this is a statement of the Lord Jesus having sovereign authority over the outcome and the success of Paul's mission.

And we don't just see this in Acts. We see this throughout Scripture. That even though God has called people, you and I, to be the instruments and the messengers of his salvation, that ultimately God is the one who saves.

That he is the one who saves. I think this, as we read this, this might raise a tension or a question for us. If, if Jesus says to Paul, I have many people in this city, you know, why doesn't Paul just say, all right, well, you got it.

[14:12] You'll take it from here. I'm just going to go home and relax and sit on the couch and watch TV. All right, Jesus, if you've got many people in the city, I'll just, I'll just relax. You got it. What, what do we say to that?

Well, we'll say a couple of things, a couple of things. First, it has always been God's plan in creation and in redemption to use human beings to represent him to the world.

Because in creation, this is what it means to be made in the image of God, that we represent God to the world. And in redemption, this is what it means to be reconciled back to God.

Second Corinthians five says that, that those of us who have been reconciled to God through Christ have now become the messengers of reconciliation. That those of us who have come to faith in Jesus have now been entrusted with the gospel.

Paul says in St. Corinthians five, it's as if we're, we're Christ ambassadors, as if God was making his appeal through us. Those who've been reconciled become ministers of reconciliation.

[15:12] You and I are not God's plan B for the advancement of the gospel. We are his plan A. We're his plan A. Secondly, the sovereignty of God, I think that we see here in this passage and throughout scripture, the sovereignty of God isn't a barrier to share the gospel.

It is our only hope in sharing the gospel. Successful evangelism from a human point of view, is it a completely impossible task? It's a completely hopeless text.

You and I cannot change people's hearts. We cannot make people believe. Ephesians two says that even the ability to believe is a gift from God that he gives so that no one can boast, not even the one who proclaims the gospel, not even the messenger.

Theologian J. I. Packer wrote a great book on this subject called evangelism and the sovereignty of God. And I would encourage you to read it. And in this book, he says this. He says, our evangelistic work is the instrument that God uses.

But the power that saves is not in the instrument. It is in the hand of one who uses the instrument.

Let me just say that again. Our evangelistic work is the instrument that God uses.

[16:26] But the power that saves is not in the instrument. It is in the hand of the one who uses the instrument. So, so pause in Corinth. And he's seeking to share the gospel.

And he's been opposed publicly, physically. He's been taken to court. He's been attacked. And this is the context in which Paul hears. And this is the context in which the persecuted church around the world hears.

And this is the context in which you and I hear the words of Jesus. Do not be afraid. Do not be silent. Go on speaking the gospel because I have many people in this city who are my people.

I have many people in Washington, D.C. Who are my people. I have many in London, in Mumbai, in Shanghai, in Bangkok, in Tokyo, in Sao Paulo, in Cairo, Manila, in Istanbul, in Guangzhou, in Moscow, in Bogota, in Tehran, in Madrid, in Nairobi, in Lagos.

Who are my people? And they may not know it yet. They might be completely secular. They might be following another religion. But before creation, I set them apart that they might know the saving power of my love.

[17:31] And so suddenly we realize that these words from Jesus are not a hindrance to evangelism. They are the rocket fuel for the mission of the church.

And this is what we see throughout the history of the church and even in the world today, that the gospel advances in hard places. It advances in hard to reach places not because of human ingenuity or strategy, but because of God's sovereign power to save.

This is what we see in Nima's story. Sarah Zilstra writes that Nima's story isn't uncommon in Iran. She says gospel growth has been happening all over Iran.

After the revolution, many students fled the repression of the Ayatollah by studying abroad. Many in the United States. Many of them were exposed to Christianity and able to begin sharing it with family on trips home.

A Christian television channel began broadcasting in Farsi into the country. Later, information flooded with the internet. Three more Christian television channels. Organizations were smuggling in Bibles.

[18:37] And the rise of international travel helped too with some missionaries in Turkey reaching out to Iranians on vacation. Nima's church in particular was good at evangelism. He said, Every one of us in the church had a group of friends and family, and first we would go to them.

And steadily, their numbers increased. And then they prayed about going to different cities. And whenever two or three people came to the Lord, Nima's church would connect them with each other and help them to begin to share their faith.

Over the past 20 years, the church has planted about 25 other small groups in 12 cities. And about 500 people have committed their lives to Jesus. And both Christian and secular researchers have observed that out of all the countries in the world, the country where Christianity is growing the fastest right now is Iran.

20 years ago, the number of Christians in Iran was between about 5,000 and 10,000. Today, it is between 800,000 and 1 million. We go and we send and we give to the advancement of the gospel in our city and around the world, not because we have a great strategy or because we are great speakers, but because we have a God who is sovereign to save.

And because he is drawing people from every tribe and people and nation and language and neighborhood. Jesus has many people in your neighborhood, on your street, in your workplace, in your sphere of influence.

[20 : 03] And he has placed you there to be his witness. Not any of the Advent pastors, not any of our staff, but you. And he is with you by his spirit. And he says, do not be afraid.

Do not be silent. But go on proclaiming the gospel. So despite opposition, the gospel advances first through evangelism rooted in the sovereignty of God.

And secondly, it advances through discipleship rooted in the word of God. Discipleship rooted in the word of God. This will be a quick point, but it's an important one. Verse 11 says that after seeing many people in Corinth come to faith in Jesus, that Paul stayed a year and six months teaching the word of God among them.

So Paul spends a year and a half taking these new believers deeply into the word of God. Deeply into the story from Old Testament to New Testament. Deeply into the gospel.

Verse 23 says that he went from one place to the next throughout the region of Galatia and Phrygia. Strengthening all the disciples. And undoubtedly the way he did this was taking them deeply into the word.

[21 : 07] Paul throughout his ministry is equally as concerned about the breadth of the gospel advancing to new places as he is about the depth of the gospel in places where the church has already been planted.

Sometimes the best point to make about a particular passage is the one that is the most obvious and the one that is the most simple. If we want to see the gospel advance in our city, our church has to be a place of deep discipleship and formation through the word of God.

Mission and evangelism can only happen if all of us are growing into maturity in Christ. And the center of that, the lifeblood of that, is God's word. Hearing the word, reading the word, praying the word, discussing the word, and meditating on the word.

This deep formation in the word of God is one of the reasons why I love being part of an Anglican church. Because we have rhythms and structures and prayers that are saturated with the word of God.

Our Sunday liturgy is saturated with the word. The daily offices of morning and evening and noon and compliment are saturated with the word. The readings of the daily office will take you through the entire Bible, Old Testament, New Testament, and Psalms.

[22 : 23] It will take you through the whole Bible in two years. And so as the summer winds down and as we look towards the fall, I always think this is one of those times throughout the year where we can pause and reset and sort of reset some of our rhythms.

Summer is winding down, fall is winding up. In this season, as you think about your life and your schedule and your rhythms, how are you going to go deeply into the word of God?

Personally, with your family, in community? Maybe. You know, I'm excited because I think there's a lot of opportunities at Advent to do this this fall. Maybe for you it means joining a core group.

Or maybe rejoining a core group. If you're new to our church, maybe it's joining foundations, which starts in December. Or, which will give you an overview of how we think about being a Christian and being part of Advent and what it means to be part of Anglican Church.

All of which are rooted in God's word. Maybe it's committing to do morning or evening prayer once or twice a week. Maybe it's reading the Bible for the first time.

[23 : 24] And if that's you, I would love to know because I'd love to help you orient to the word. I'd love to help you know where to start. As you look towards the fall, how are you going to go deeply into the word of God?

There's no formation. There's no discipleship without it. Nima eventually ended up in Australia where a man there mentored him, taught him theology, and encouraged him to go to seminary at Moore Theological College.

After seminary, he moved to Los Angeles as a missionary to reach out to the Iranian population there. Outside of Iran, the place with the highest concentration of Iranians is California.

And so Nima now works at a pastor at an ACNA church in Southern California. And he started an online platform in order to do evangelism and discipleship in Farsi.

Sarah Zylstra writes that this past year, the pandemic sent Iranians online more than ever. These days, Nima's online discipleship program has ballooned from 40 people to 620, split into classes for seekers and new believers, theology and doctrine, and a Bible study for mature believers.

[24 : 32] And on Saturdays, Nima invites pastors and leaders of different churches in the Iranian community to talk about current issues. Nima's story in Acts chapter 18 show that the gospel advances despite opposition in places like Corinth and in places like Tehran and in places like D.C.

Through evangelism rooted in the sovereignty of God and discipleship rooted in the word of God.

You can't have mission without formation. The gospel only goes out if it sinks down. And so may we be a church that is so deeply formed by the word of God that we can't help but be propelled out into mission because we know that Jesus is sovereign over this city.

And because we know that his word is sufficient. Let's pray. Lord Jesus, you are sovereign to save.

And your word is sufficient. May we be a church that is rooted in your sovereignty. In the sufficiency of your word.

Amen.