

Acts 18:1–17

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[0 : 00] 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 tent makers 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 the name of Paul was in the fire.

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 Galileo was pro-council 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.

[1 : 26] But when Paul was about to open his mouth, Galileo 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 Galileo paid no attention to any of this. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. You may be seated. Well, a good morning to you, and especially those of you who might be visiting in our midst or just arriving in our city.

You come today on what is for us the first Sunday within our summer calendar. Normally we are commencing a new series today, given that many of our university students have now left the neighborhood.

And we assemble those of us who are here throughout the year. But this year we are just going to keep moving through the book of Acts. I've told you I've been enamored with Luke's account of the early church.

[2 : 48] And we're just going to stay right through and probably conclude sometime by the end of September. So here we are in the summer, in the midst of our series in the book of Acts.

Generally, we don't think of the Apostle Paul as one who shares our emotional or psychological disposition.

We think that Paul is elevated in strength beyond our frailties. He appears to be a man who is self-contained and always self-controlled and self-assured.

That he is unlike us, not like us. But here I take for my text today this vignette of Corinth.

And in particular, a night in the life of the Apostle Paul as seen in verse 9. And the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, Do not be afraid.

[4 : 09] Do not be afraid. Evidently, even the Apostle Paul lay awake on his bed on some nights with anxieties filling his mind, fears filling his heart over outcomes that he could not control in the coming day.

I suppose if I was to title the talk, I would title it Courage for Corinth. But the aim of the message would be your confidence for Chicago.

Paul needed courage in Corinth. And you and I will receive, through a description of that event, confidence for Chicago.

Psalm 127 says, In vain do we eat the bread of anxious toil. For he gives to his beloved sleep. A verse that I've always pondered, how do I get a hold of it?

For I know the anxiety part. And I know the restlessness and the sleeplessness part. But even Paul, therefore, had moments of anxiety where sleep may have escaped him.

[5 : 38] We knew that he had fear in Corinth, not only because the vision comes to tell him, do not be afraid. But when he takes up a letter of correspondence to the Corinthian church, what you and I know as the first letter of Paul to the Corinthians, he offers in chapter 2 of that very letter an indication of the fearful state in which he arrived in their midst.

The scripture says, And when I came to you, brothers, that is, Paul speaking to the church at Corinth, I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling.

Paul, in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. What he was afraid of in Corinth is clear from the words in verse 9.

But why he feared that, well, that's what lays under the text of verses 1 through 8. What was he afraid of? Verse 9, Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent.

He was afraid of verbally sharing the gospel with people who were publicly engaged in the city of Corinth.

[7 : 07] He didn't want to open his mouth. Have you ever had that in a restaurant or even talking to a neighbor or colleague?

An internal fear of verbalizing Jesus for some unforeseen reason.

Paul, this great apostle who proclaims the gospel to the world, when he arrived at Corinth, was afraid to speak.

Why that was is what unfolds in verses 1 through 8. Let me see if we can look at it. I'm just going to highlight what I think are two reasons, causes of his fear.

First, there was a public hostility toward Christianity at work in the world. In other words, he was aware that he lived in a time where there were these increasingly antagonistic encounters between his message and the men who ruled the world.

[8 : 29] That is actually embedded in verse 2 of chapter 18. Notice you're introduced to Priscilla and to Aquila.

But the indication here of Luke highlights the time period of Claudius, who was one of the Caesars. And it says that Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome.

Now what's going on there? Aquila and Priscilla are Christians, yet Jews, and have been under the edict of the emperor to be expelled from the great city of Rome.

So is it that the Jews were expelled from Rome, or is it that the Jewish Christians were expelled from Rome? We might receive some insight into the historical situation by referencing Suetonius, who was an early writer of the era.

He published a book. He wanted to be read. He found his volume on the modern stalls of the second century in the Roman world.

[9 : 59] And the book that he published was titled The Twelve Caesars. Think of them as biographical sketches of the rulers of the world.

One of the twelve was Claudius, this individual, in which he titles that chapter The Life of Claudius. And in the midst of The Life of Claudius, he recounts a time when Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome.

Listen to what he writes. Since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Crestus, he expelled them from Rome.

Now, there's a vowel distinction between Crestus and Christus, but in all likelihood, what had happened in Rome was that the Christians who had converted from Judaism were underneath the swelling differences of allegiance between Rome and the new ruler, Christ.

In fact, the entire context at a literary level of the life of Claudius, around which that line is embedded, distinguishes between Claudius' work in distancing pure Romans from other religions.

[11 : 34] And so, in all likelihood, the situation is this. Jews have come to faith in Rome, following Christ, to the point where it becomes an agitational situation between the Jewish religion, who had protection under Rome, and this new upstart Christian message, to the point where finally, the world says, enough!

If you're Jewish, you're gone! Expelled from Rome. A few years ago, I recall a moment when our own mayor wanted to ensure that an incoming business under a Christian owner would have no access to space in our city.

And the reason given was simply this. Whoever owns that business does not share our city's values. It created quite a stir.

Eventually, the business opened. But it's not too far away to consider the world in which you and I live, where you're under the arbitrary decisions of worldly leaders who can provide protection and cover for religious faith or restriction upon it.

And in this day, it wasn't merely the movement against a Christian business having access to the city and protection for it, even when their values changed.

[13 : 31] It was the expulsion of an entire people group. And so Paul is aware. I live in a world where public hostility toward the Christian message is in play.

I live in a world that is increasingly antagonistic toward religion by those who are in a place of rule.

And so as he beds down in Corinth and goes to bed, remember this, he's just left Athens.

The city of the ancient ideals. And he's now in Corinth, the capital of the region for Rome.

And he's wondering at night, where is the freedom of the expression of my religion? Two observations when those thoughts might keep you up at night.

One, it's at such a time as this that lifelong friendships are born. Don't you see that in the first four verses? Paul finds a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla.

[14 : 50] And because he was of the same trade, they found each other as leather workers or tent makers. He stayed with them and worked. And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath and tried to persuade Jews and Greeks.

At such a time as you are fearful of speaking Christ, it may be the moment when you meet an individual who will be a lifelong friend.

for they had been displaced from their native city. But in their displacement, they met Paul and Paul met them.

Friendship is the result of the world's hostility. Not only friendship, but fruitful labor.

Notice, they are now engaged in proclaiming the Gospels week by week in the synagogue. It's what we find even in the midst of our own congregation.

[15 : 57] Christians who meet Christians who find their way forward in proclamation, feeding off one another's courage to continue speaking in the name of Jesus.

Even though we dwell at a time where some spasmodic, isolated moment of oppression could occur. In fact, it went so far in verse 5 as to become a point in time in Paul's life where he wasn't even making tents.

He got into gospel witness full time. Take a look at verse 5. When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, it says, Paul was occupied with the word, testifying to the Jews that the Christ was Jesus.

In 2 Corinthians 11 and in Philippians 4, we learn that when Silas and Timothy arrived from where they had been left behind in Philippi and then Athens and now here, when they arrive here, it says that they brought a gift from the church in Macedonia.

In other words, they brought money. And Paul took the money and said, I'm not making tents for a while. In fact, he leveraged it in Corinth who wanted him to be paid and said, I refuse to be paid and I will support myself.

[17 : 26] But he supported himself through the gifts of a church in a distant place. And so when it says he was occupied with the word, it means simply this. He was no longer working as a tent maker, but day by day by day was doing all he could to proclaim the name of Jesus.

This is fruitful. Friendship, fellowship, and fruitful ministry are the result of living at a time where there's public hostility and increasing antagonism toward the Christian faith.

That ought to be an encouragement to you. But that wasn't the only reason he was afraid. Look at verses six through eight. He not only feared the public hostility toward the message he was preaching, but he was well acquainted with the personal hurt that he had experienced due to the word that was preached by him.

He had a history of when he spoke up for Jesus, bad things happened. And finally, when he arrived at Corinth, he said, you know what?

I've been on quite a run. Literally, at times on the run. In my boldness, I have suffered harm.

[18 : 50] And when I speak for Jesus, things go poorly for me. You saw that in the first missionary journey, didn't you?

Antioch in Pisidia, chapter 1350, it says he had been driven out. When he got to Iconium, it said he actually had to run out.

In Lystra, he had been stoned only to return and write to them many tribulations is the only way we will win out. When he got to Thessalonica, in the midst of the night, he was hushed out.

In Philippi, and in Athens, he is eventually sent out. When he spoke, he fled. It wasn't just public hostility to the message.

It was personal injury that made him fearful of speaking. What is it then? What is it about Paul?

[19 : 53] And what is it about you? What is it about this word? This word that of necessity or in normative sense, the word of the gospel brings personal injury on those who embrace it.

It's quite different than the gospel that many people in our country are preaching. That if you embrace the gospel today, you will be ever liberated or freed from any problems or dilemmas. But in actual fact, the normative course of the Christian's life is that when you speak for Jesus, bad things will happen to you. What is it about the word that we proclaim?

Take a look across the page in Thessalonica, chapter 17, when he's reasoning in verse 2 from the scriptures. But notice in verse 3 the nature or the content or the emphasis of the Christian message. He's explaining and proving what? That it was necessary for the Christ to suffer. That's the uniqueness of the message of Paul.

[21 : 12] Paul. He's proclaiming a gospel that is effectuated in hearts through the sufferings of God's servant.

And when he writes the church in Thessalonica later, in chapter 2, verse 13, he will say to them in the midst of their own sufferings that the very word which was received by you is now at work in you.

Well, how was the word at work in the Thessalonian believers? By their participation in sufferings. That is the content of the gospel.

When Paul proclaimed the word, when he spoke up for Jesus, he was speaking of the sufferings of the Messiah.

and when that word that went out from him was embraced and embedded within them, it meant that they, like him, would model him and they also would be ensconced in suffering.

[22 : 24] No wonder he didn't want to speak. No wonder he didn't want to speak. He's afraid because he already sees the markings in Corinth that he'd seen in his own journey.

Look at that very briefly in 6 through 8. He's now being opposed. He's now being reviled. He's now shaking off his garments.

This symbolic act of you've rejected me and now he now is actually saying blood be on your own heads.

In other words, it's not only a symbolic act of their rejection but through his own words, he's saying your condemnation before the Father will be on your own head, not on mine.

It will be a self-inflicted judgment. I am clear of your blood. And whenever this has happened previously to Paul, as I've already mentioned, whether it be Antioch and Pisidia, or Iconium, or Derbe, or Lystra, or Thessalonica, the inevitable consequence was it was also coming back upon him.

[23 : 39] And as he had seen their rejection in Corinth, he had also experienced the reception of the gospel in Corinth. Verse 7, he's in the house of Titius Justice, a worshiper of God.

There's a man named Crispus who was the ruler of the synagogue, who's now a believer in his whole household. And he's now holding church in the house next to the synagogue.

And he's sleeping in a place where Aquila and Priscilla are present. And rushing through his mind in the middle of the night is, are they coming for me tonight?

1980, early 80s, I was in the Philippines. Aquino had just been assassinated on the tarmac. we were out in the, away from the city, and the looting began.

And the home in which I was staying had already been robbed on different occasions. In fact, the looters had taken a picture that was hanging over the bed of the owners of the house while they were asleep.

[24 : 57] and they weren't going to let it happen again. And I remember at the age of about 21, having my position in the midst of the night as we heard the dogs barking, which was indicating that they had come and they were there just in the tall grasses some 20 yards from the house.

And I stood with a baseball bat on the side of the door at my post for three hours, waiting for the door handle to jiggle and wondering how I would defend myself or the owners of the home if they had come for us in the midst of the night.

I remember my blood elevated. I remember not wanting to move an arm to wipe the sweat away. And I remember, thank God, they never came. Paul is in Corinth in a state of fear.

because he's aware that public hostility is at play in the world against the Christian message. He's all too familiar with the personal injury that has come to him due to the proclamation of the message.

[26 : 28] And it's at that moment that he gets this most extraordinary vision. Our text, the Lord comes to him at night in the vision and says, 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.

What he was given on that night is the most unusual of promises. Not participation in Christ's sufferings, but divine protection that the word might go forth in a season without any sufferings placed upon Paul.

This is the counter moment of normative Christian life for Paul. No wonder he would have needed a vision to believe it.

And yet, there it is. It's the unique season in which peace was going to be the exception. It's the unique moment which contemporary Christianity misses entirely as we look at what is described here about Paul and we prescribe that prayer as something we ought to experience throughout all of life.

But what he is given is a little window, a little window where his words went out and persecution doesn't come back. And he evidently woke up in the morning and took hold of it.

[28 : 03] And if you look at verse 11, you see the stunning nature of that. And he stayed a year and six months teaching the word of God among them. There was a divine promise of protection that asked him to remain persistently in place.

Every other time he moves on. Here he's told, stay. Stay. And so it is with all of us.

God will move his church around through displacement, persecution, protection. But there are seasons where you are simply to remain persistently in place come what may.

I can't give you this promise this morning. But I can tell you that as you speak the word of the gospel and overcome your fear, God will have his way.

And whether it causes you injury or harm, God will do his work. work, whether it is met by the rejection of those you speak to this week or the reception of those you speak to this week, God's word goes forth.

[29 : 40] It ought to go forth from our midst in this week hundreds and hundreds of times in this city. if everyone were to speak the name of Jesus in this city once in the course of the week, prayerfully asking for God to lead, you can put up with anything, public hostility, personal indifference, rejection, or reception, because this I do know until Christ comes, he's got some more people in this city.

The sun rises with eternal intention. He has more people in this city. There are those who have been on the platform today, who have solidified their commitments to Christ over the last few years in this city.

There are those in chairs. I could get a witness if I called them by name, who could stand and say to you, I have come to Jesus through the proclamation of the gospel by those from this congregation over the last few weeks, last few months, there are more people in the city.

And so this is the call that the courage that Paul needed for Corinth ought to provide confidence in Chicago. Not that you'll be delivered from harm, but that people might be delivered from sin.

The rest of the vignette, 12 to the end, reads like one dramatic day in which God's promise of divine protection was manifested.

[31 : 42] And we won't need to spend long on it. But after some time, while the promise was that no one will attack you to harm you, it didn't necessarily mean that no one would ever attack him.

Because when Galileo was pro-council of Achaia, a pro-council, one who ruled with delegated authority under Caesar, in charge of this region in which Corinth was, the Jews at that point, that is the non-believing Jews of the synagogue in Corinth made, it says, a united attack on Paul and brought him before the tribunal, which would have been the place of judgment where the city ruler

made all his judicial decisions.

and what they say is, this guy should not deserve the protection of Rome. We have the protection of Rome because we are working well within the confines of Roman rule, but this guy is proclaiming a Christ that is undoing our Jewish laws, and believe me, over time, we'll undo your law.

And at that moment, I love this verse, verse 14, but when Paul was about to open his mouth, he was about to defend himself, the worldly ruler, Gallio himself, says, I got this.

I'm not even worried about this stuff. This is stuff for you guys to deal with. Don't take up any more time in my court. I've got a luncheon appointment I need to get to.

[33 : 27] And I deem this unworthy of any consideration by Rome. Now notice the irony in the text. The text opens with this increasing antagonism toward the message at the time of Claudius for the Christians in Rome, but the text closes with not increasing antagonism, but a stated indifference to the gospel by the same worldly rulers.

He didn't care. And so Paul is set free to go and do whatever it is he wants. In fact, he drove them, that is, those who had brought charges against Paul, from the tribunal.

the language isn't stunning. Paul always being driven out, now the worldly ruler is providing him cover, giving him protection, giving him space to operate, and driving out those who would have harmed him.

And then that stunning end, they all seized Sathenes, the ruler of the synagogue, and beat him in front of the tribunal, but Gallio paid no attention to any of this.

this is a horrific act of anti-Semitism by the indifference of the world, that cared nothing about whether an individual, according to their religious belief, was beaten up, whether by the Jewish people who came with him, and were like, man, I got in a bad way by going with you today, or whether it was just the Roman citizens, we do not know.

[34 : 57] But Gallio's moment of indifference actually didn't provide protection for a Jewish ruler. court, and he's beaten, and here's Paul, unique moment in his life, people, very unique.

He wasn't on the wrong side on this day of the whip. Don't know, but when Paul does write 1 Corinthians, it's written by two people, Paul and Apostle, and it says, the Sosthenes, our brother. Definite article. Could it be? We'll find out when we get there, but could it be that this Sosthenes, the ruler of the synagogue, eventually comes to faith, having chastised Paul, and now is able to be part of the letter writing committee back to the church.

Let me conclude. Paul needed courage in Corinth. Over what? Over speaking up for Jesus.

may his courage give you confidence. And in the midst of it, may you continually at night lay your head down and thank God that you're not waiting for someone at the door.

[36 : 39] That he's given you a season of freedom and peace to proclaim his name. and may you appreciate all the friendships that will be yours as a result of others falling under the hostility of the world.

And may you know the fellowship of being in the midst of other people who are co-laboring to make Jesus known. And may you demonstrate by your persistence of place that even there you are willing to continually proclaim the name of Christ.

For this week, be confident. It is well. It is well. It is well with your soul.

our heavenly father, we now think of Paul's disposition. We thank you that there was at least a moment when he was a lot like us.

And we pray that we would have the confidence in the gospel to bear up under anything that would come as a result of our proclaiming it.

[38 : 10] And Lord, while you haven't appeared to us in a vision today, nor will you, you have spoken to us through this word clearly written.

Lord, help us to speak for you. for indeed it is well with our soul.

Amen. Let's stand and go out under the music.