

# What happens at Christmas?

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 22 November 2018

Preacher: Petasha Evans

[ 0 : 00 ] The reading today is from Acts chapter 18, verses 117, and is found on page 1117. After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth, and he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontius, 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 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 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 worshipper 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 his vision, Do not be afraid, but go on speaking, and do not be silent.

[ 1 : 28 ] 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 amongst them.

But when Galileo 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, 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. It really is great to be back at Grace Church Dulwich and to see a few familiar faces.

[ 2 : 36 ] I often go to churches and I know nobody and they're all strangers. But looking out around here, it is good to see one or two folks who I know in the past prayed for us when we were overseas with Crosslink.

So great to be here. Let's pray as we come to Acts chapter 18. Father God, we pray now that you would give us ears to hear.

We pray that you would give us eyes to see and hearts that would respond in obedience and faith to your word to us this morning. Help us, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

I don't know about you. My experience of travelling to European cities on a city break is fairly limited.

But last year, my wife and I, Helen, we were in Budapest for a very, very short weekend visiting my sister, who's a Crosslink's mission partner there.

[ 3 : 34 ] And my impressions were, what a stunning city with wide, clean streets, amazing architecture, history, beautiful weather.

I wonder what some of your recollections or impressions have been if you have travelled to European cities. Here are a few examples of the way that one website tries to whet our appetite to go and visit a city on this continent.

So Belfast, let's start there. Why not? Belfast, a gateway to a land of legends. Berlin, young, dynamic and cosmopolitan. Venice, the city that you will fall in love with.

And Florence, where love and culture is everywhere. Athens, last of all, Europe's oldest open-air museum. There's more to cities than meets the eye.

At least the way a travel company tries to sell them to us. Listen to this description of Naples by Mark Oden, which is striking. He says, Europe ends here in Naples.

[ 4 : 45 ] And ends here quite badly. It's a city where religion and superstition overlap. A city where a test tube contains the blood of the patron saint, Saint Gnerus, that liquefies twice a year and is venerated.

It is a city of great spiritual need. Closer to home. I love London City Mission's strap line, which is, of course, because London needs Jesus.

Because London needs Jesus. And that is the reason for Paul's itinerary in this part of Acts. Acts chapter 13 to 19 are mini city breaks in Europe, but with a difference, with a twist.

Because Philippi needs Jesus. Because Thessalonica needs Jesus. And Athens, Paul had spent only a short time in this great open air museum, as it is now, recorded there in Acts 17.

Next stop, Corinth. Next stop, Corinth. Look at verse 1. After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. Now, Google will tell you that it will take about 16 hours to walk the Isthmus from Athens down to Corinth.

[ 6 : 05 ] And had Paul owned the equivalent of Lonely Planet's Guide to Missionary Travels, what would he have been reading as he walked for those 16 hours? Perhaps he would have been going to Corinth thinking, I've got to find the nearest synagogue.

I'm also going to speak to Jews before I speak to non-Jews. And I'm going to head for the city centre. And I've got to know who my friends are.

I don't know. There was no such handbook. And as many of you know well here, there is no definitive guide to planting a church. There is no textbook for it.

And I once made the mistake of asking someone in our church family a number of years back what books he'd been reading in order to prepare for this church plant that he was involved in. And he basically laughed and said, look, I've been making it up as I go along.

And our passage highlights two things that would have motivated Paul as he travelled to Corinth, as he ministered in Corinth. Two things which I hope will keep us going on strong in our witness to the Lord Jesus Christ here in Dulwich and as we engage in mission opportunities around the world.

[ 7 : 17 ] The first is in verses 1 to 8. And forgive me for giving the wrong title to Simon and for that ending up there. That was my fault. But verses 1 to 8. Look for gospel opportunities despite opposition.

Look for gospel opportunities despite opposition. Lonely planet would have summed up Paul as he arrived in Corinth, chapter 18, verse 1. He is all alone.

And that wasn't meant to be the plan. If you glance back to Acts 17, verse 15, let me read that to you. Towards the end of his time in Thessalonica and Berea, we read in verse 15, And those who conducted Paul brought him as far as Athens, and after receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him as soon as possible, they departed.

And Silas and Timothy are still in this place Berea. Verse 16 says that Paul was waiting for them in Athens. And so by the time he gets to Corinth, he's arrived on his own.

He's there on his own. How would he have felt arriving in Corinth on his own? Well, I'll tell you. You can glance over to 1 Corinthians, chapter 2, and I'll read there verse 3.

[ 8 : 42 ] 1 Corinthians 2, verse 3, describing Paul's time in Corinth. Paul came in much weakness and in fear and much trembling. And my speech and my message were not plausible words of wisdom, but demonstrations of the Spirit and power.

Paul came in much weakness and fear and trembling as he arrived in Corinth. He's no super apostle, as he goes on and claims and proves in his letters to the Corinthians.

He's no elite missionary. We shouldn't build Paul up as some kind of giant. He didn't rate his ability to speak about the Lord Jesus. And he came with knees knocking in fear and trembling.

Isn't that us, too, most of the time? Where we live, we live in a little cul-de-sac in a village outside of Sevenoaks. And maybe this is not the picture you will think of when you think of Sevenoaks.

But anyway, it's a cul-de-sac where Molly the dog roams freely. And car mechanics operate on at least a third of the driveways doing their own car maintenance.

[ 9 : 52 ] Molly is a Rottweiler. And the mechanics are very proud of their tattoos. They like to show them off. And for months when we arrived, I felt like a fish out of water.

I trembled at the thought of getting into conversation with this little subculture in this little part of Kent. Especially when it came to saying, I'm a Christian and we belong to this church. And talking a bit more about Jesus. What hope for the gospel could I think of? And I shared something of what Paul perhaps went through in a much bigger scale here in Corinth. Where he experiences the Corinthian culture shock. It was a sort of first century equivalent to Vanity Fair. I don't know if you saw the TV series or you've read the book. But William Thackeray, who wrote the book, describes Vanity Fair as a place where everybody is striving for what is not worth having. And if Paul had been disturbed by the religious melting pot in Athens, it was no doubt the moral laxity that shocked him in Corinth.

[11:01] And yet, Dr. Luke shows us God giving opportunities despite opposition. Despite the cultural tide that is bearing down and sweeping over and up against Paul.

How so? How do we see these opportunities? Well, look at verse 2. Enter Aquila and Priscilla. Let me read verse 2. 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. Was this a coincidence for Paul to bump into this couple?

Only if you don't believe that this mission that Paul is part of is God's mission. A dynamic duo. A dynamic Christian duo. Aquila and Priscilla. Because of their Jewish background. Because of their Jewish background. They'd been kicked out of Rome by the Emperor Claudius around about AD 50.

[12:03] And here, Paul stumbles into them in Corinth. Verse 3. And he goes into business with them. And as we know, they proved to be towers of strength to Paul in his ministry of the gospel.

As they stand side by side with him. They're gospel partners with Paul. They're gospel patrons. Paul would be nowhere without people like Aquila and Priscilla. And years later, he would write to the church in Rome.

He would say that Priscilla and Aquila, putting Priscilla's name first, interestingly, risked their lives for me. Put themselves on the line for me. And so that is what God does.

As he opens up doors for the gospel. He provides people who will enable the gospel to go out, whatever the cost. They'll stump up the cash. They'll open their homes.

They will write thoughtful emails of encouragement. They will go and visit. They will stand side by side with those on the front line. And we can all think of Priscilla's and Aquila's who have come alongside us at the right time.

[13:10] Someone on a camp for a youngster, perhaps. Or someone else who's just joined Grace Church Dulwich. And already they're beginning to sense that people are serious about the gospel. And God will continue to do this as he builds his church.

Because he's absolutely committed to using weak and trembling people like you and me. To proclaim repentance for the forgiveness of sins to the whole world. Aquila and Priscilla.

Well next, Timothy and Silas rock up in Corinth. And they can be forgiven actually for being late. Look back in chapter 17 verse 14.

Then the brothers immediately sent Paul off on his way to the sea. But Silas and Timothy remained there. So they are there as we know already.

And they have borne the brunt of the angry Thessalonian mob who come down from Thessalonica looking for Paul. Paul slips out. But they stay put.

[14:11] They come to Corinth bearing the scars of persecution. Physically or emotionally. They could have bailed. They could have taken the path of least resistance.

The easy option. But instead of steering clear of Paul. Because we know what's going to happen if we're with him. They come looking for him. And look at the effect they have.

Verse 5. Verse 5. When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia. Paul was occupied with the word. Testifying to the Jews. That the Christ was Jesus. Actually verse 5 could read like this. When Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia. Paul became wholly absorbed in preaching. Testifying. It was as if something happened. Paul put his tools down when Silas and Timothy arrived.

And he opened up his Bible on a more regular basis. They're a kind of. They're like the impact players. That came on in the second half. And lifted the side. Silas and Timothy.

[15:14] They come bringing good news. About the churches in Macedonia. They come with gifts. They come with tangible expressions. Physical expressions of partnership.

And they're not going to run. They're not going to hide. They're going to stand with Paul. Alongside Aquila and Priscilla. So friends. Don't underestimate.

The prayers. The one-off gifts. The pledges even. The hospitality. The visits. Just the mere interest. That you can have. In people working. Outside of. The Dulwich context. To the west coast of Ireland. Into Europe and further. God creates.

Opportunities. For the gospel. Because it's his. Mission. He'll organize. The right people. In the right place. With the right resources. Whatever the obstacles.

[16:12] That we see. Back in Acts. 18. Verse 5. And 6. Things are. Changing.

Paul is opening the Bible. He's proclaiming. He's testifying. To the Jews. That the Christ. Was Jesus. And there's a different reaction. There's a reaction there.

They opposed. And reviled him. They opposed. And reviled him. See what is happening. Is what Charles. Spurgeon describes. When he says. That the sun. That melts.

The wax. Also hardens. The clay. The same gospel. That melts. Some people. To repentance. Hardens. Others. In their hearts. In their sin.

That is the response. To Paul. While some hear. The message of Jesus. And become harder. And revile him. As they have done. All the way since. Antioch. And Acts. 13.

[17:08] Others have their hearts. Softened. By the message. And sometimes. The opportunities. God gives us. Are right next door. We don't have to go far.

They're right next door. Because Paul leaves. His hub. The center of activity. The synagogue. And he pretty much goes. Next door. Verse 7.

He's in the house of. Titius Justice. A worshiper of God. House. Next door. To the synagogue. And he opens up his home. To Paul. Probably a Roman. Citizen.

But sympathetic. To Paul's cause. He's a worshiper of God. He wants to know. More of this. This divine being. That he is seeing. So many snapshots of.

Around the place. And I suspect. That Titius Justice. Had quite a large. Atrium. Where the church. If there was to be one.

[18:02] Could meet. In verse 8. Crispus. The ruler of the synagogue. Believed in the Lord. Together with his entire. Household. Crispus.

The synagogue leader. He pays a visit. Family in tow. And surely this is. Curtains for Paul. And this new. Opportunity. He's coming from the synagogue. Which has just reviled him.

To pay a visit. To the house next door. But no. Because again. The gospel. Is at work. People of influence. Like Crispus.

People of great means. Like Titius Justice. People of extremist. Violent backgrounds. Like the apostle Paul. Are now standing together. One in Christ.

Contending for the faith. Now if that doesn't encourage us. What will. God plans ahead. Bringing. Couples. Couples.

[18:59] Individuals. God works. Next door. And God is. Opening. Opportunities. And slowly and surely. Christchurch. Corinth. Is getting established.

That's been the experience. Of Grace Church. As you've planted. In Broccoli. And more recently. Sydenham. And yet. Don't we still. Shrink back at the task.

When we want to open our mouths. Our knees are knocking. And we still. Perhaps. Fear for our. Our reputation. What will it happen. If I really throw in my lot. With that lot. Our future.

Our finances. And sometimes. Let's be honest. We just don't want to open our mouths. That's how I have felt. When I've talked to guys. On the street. Now I don't know about you.

What sermons you've heard. On mission. There are plenty. Entitled. Mission possible. Spin off from Mission Impossible. Or Mission Unstoppable. Well this one.

[19:59] Is. Mission Assured. Because secondly. God gives. Gospel assurance. Despite fears. God gives.

Gospel assurance. Despite. Fears. Paul. Perhaps. Was now feeling. Quite optimistic. But he was feeling.

Extremely. Anxious. Because if he wasn't. A marked man. He certainly was now. And if ever there was a time. To keep quiet. Fly under the radar. And perhaps let others.

Do the work. Now was that time. And as we've said. What's often the first thing that happens. When we're put in. On the line like this. We become tongue tied.

And we. Maybe you've memorized. Proverbs 21 verse 23. For such an occasion. Which says. Watch your tongue. And keep your mouth shut. And you will stay out of trouble. Well that wasn't Paul here.

[ 20 : 55 ] But. Look at verses 9. And 10. We don't know exactly. When this happened. But as he went to sleep. 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. Don't be afraid. Keep on speaking. Don't be silent. Why? Verse 10. For I am with you. And I have many. In this city. Who are my people. These are two. Gospel promises.

Two gospel assurances. That should turn our fears. Upside down. On their heads. Inside out. The first one. I am with you. And we sang it.

[ 21 : 50 ] Just a minute ago. Emmanuel. Emmanuel. Our God is with us. Now. I remember when I joined. Secondary school. And I joined this grammar.

Secondary school. At the age of. 13. 14. And I'd been in a smaller school. Up until this point. Where I. Actually. Eyeballed the headmaster. Got into the.

All the rugby. And team. Sports teams. On account of being. Almost six foot. And. It was quite comfortable. Actually. In this little school. And then I went to grammar school. And.

There was this strange. Species. Of students. Called. Sick formers. Who lurked. The. The. The. Corridors. And hallways. And now they looked down on me.

And they were bigger than me. And I would walk up from the station. Through the gates. With my knees knocking. Thinking. Ah. Just keep your head down. Don't say anything. Don't say anything stupid.

[ 22 : 45 ] But every now and again. I caught sight of somebody. Around the school. And. Gave me a great sense of assurance. And. That everything was going to be okay.

Kind of thing. For a 13. 14 year old. It was my older brother. Who was. One of these. Sick formers. And he'd catch my eye. And every now and again.

He'd ask me how I was doing. And it really gave me a confidence. A warmth. And a sort of ease. And I began to speak to my year group. And I began to even speak to his year group.

The sixth form. And I became known as Reed II. On account of him. My older brother. And as long as he was around. It felt like I'd be okay. Why are we so intimidated to speak up as Christians? Is it because we're then minority? Or because of our reputation? Well I think it's because as we enter the front line. Day after day.

[ 23 : 44 ] Wherever that is. We forget that our older brother is with us. And his name is Jesus. Emmanuel. God. With.

Us. Until the end of the age. Doesn't mean that you won't face opposition. But God's. Well here in Paul's situation.

This promise of. Wasn't a blanket promise of protection. He had been in prison in Philippi. He'd been beaten. He had the scars. But it does assure us that we're not in it alone.

So don't be afraid. To open your mouth. Don't be afraid. Look at the second promise. In verse 10. I have many in this city. Who are my people.

And Paul could have been forgiven for questioning that in a place like Corinth. But as he woke up. And rubbed the sleep from his eyes. Names would pop into his head.

[ 24 : 42 ] Aquila. Oh yeah. Priscilla. Silas Timothy. Titius Justice. Crispus. Mrs Crispus. Crispus Junior. Plenty of others. The company.

Not to mention. The Corinthian believers. Who names he'd not yet remembered. It might not have felt like mission accomplished. But it was mission assured.

And that's exactly where you and I are to be. God does have many people in this city. He is a God who gathers after all.

And this emboldens us. As we sang it. The watchmen lift their voices. It emboldens us to speak of our saviour. The Lord Jesus Christ. But as we come to the end of this passage.

We end. With quite a strange episode. That actually bears out. What we've been thinking about just now. In verses 9 and 10. You see. 18 months on. And Christchurch Corinth is growing.

[ 25 : 41 ] But there's a new sheriff in town. Galio. Galio. Galio. The proconsul of Archaea. Is now the top dog in the city. And for the Jews. This is the perfect opportunity.

To put an end to the work of the gospel. To get rid of Paul. Better still. To finish him off once and for all. And what they do is. They call up the proconsul.

And they say. We need a tribunal here. Because this man Paul. He's trouble. He's persuading people. Verse 13. To worship God in a way contrary to the law.

And Paul is summoned. And everybody is nervous. Everybody is nervous. The last time. A Christian. Or a. A Christian leader.

Stood before a proconsul. It was the Lord Jesus Christ. When he stood before Pontius Pilate. And we know what happened. And so by verse 13. It's not looking good for Paul.

[ 26 : 41 ] And yet. Just as he had been encouraged to do. That night. 18 months back. Paul. Goes to open his mouth. To give a defense.

He's not going to be on the back foot. You see there. In verse 14. But when Paul was about to open his mouth. And then what happens. Surprisingly. Galio opens his mouth.

And he interrupts. And there's silence. Surely this is it. He's going to cut to the chase. And finish it. But even more surprisingly. Galio shakes his head.

And says. I couldn't. Frankly. I couldn't care less about this. You lot are wasting my time. Do you see what's happening? God is so directing the heart of Galio.

That his indifference. Is the very means that enables the church to grow. God plans ahead. He comes alongside.

[ 27 : 37 ] Now he stands above. And it shows us that God is sovereign. Over the most influential. Powerful figures. In this city. Galio. Galio.

Galio. And actually now Sosthenes. Secular authority. Followed by religious authority. Because there's also a new synagogue ruler. But.

We kind of feel sorry for Sosthenes. At the end of this story. We should do. He becomes the object of his own people's anger. Maybe he didn't carry out the plan properly. When this tribunal was being planned.

Maybe he made one too many concessions. And. And yet. God is sovereign. Sosthenes story. Doesn't end here.

In a pool of blood. At the end of verse 17. Because. Again. Sosthenes name comes up. Beginning of the letter to.

[ 28 : 36 ] The Corinthians. Chapter 1. Verse 1. Of 1 Corinthians. We read. Paul. Called by the will of God.

To be an apostle. Of Christ Jesus. And our brother. Sosthenes. Seven years later. Sosthenes. Is writing to a church.

That he is. Presumably played a pivotal part. In establishing. What an encouragement. Then. That in God's mission. Our fears. Don't have the last word.

We can take heart. Because God is with us. He knows the people. Who are his. And I'm learning this. On my street. God is giving us. Conversations. With. With the people.

Who shout the loudest. And seem to have the most clout. On the road. And I'm learning it. From our mission partners. Too. With cross links. Let me just tell you briefly. About.

[ 29 : 32 ] You may have heard this story. Of Mark Oden. Church plant. Cheia Neapolis. Evangelica. And church plant. In Naples. Well. They planned these. I think it was the second.

Anniversary of their church. Baptisms. There were going to be. Two people baptized. I think the 36th. 35th. 5th. 6th members. Of the. Of the congregation. And he was.

Desperately texting. Saying you know. Pray that it won't rain. It looks like it's going to rain. And we've got a. Whole big logistical problem. But more importantly. Paul. Mark was saying. Just pray that the.

That the. The civic council. The city council. Don't put a stop. To this event. I'm trying to persuade them. And it would be a good thing. Bring people together. You know. Do something different.

And sure enough. Neither the. Neither the city officials. Nor the religious. Institutions. Put a stop. To that. Bit of gospel work. Just like in Corinth.

[ 30 : 29 ] And the church is growing. It's small. But it is growing. And so. What about here. In Dulwich. Who are those. That you fear most.

Where are the places. That you dread. To open your mouth. What are the greatest threats. To your growth. As a church. Could it be. That some of us. This morning.

Have taken. Our eyes. Off. Our older brother. Who is with us. Emmanuel. Are you. Sometimes. Struck dumb. By influential leaders.

In your community. Who just seem to carry. More clout. Have we forgotten. That the mission. Is God's. Are we trying to. Control it. To control.

The ebb and flow. The highs and lows. And make it more manageable. Well it is God's mission. He will give the opportunities. He will bring the results.

[ 31 : 25 ] And he. Will gain. The glory. So may God. Stand beside you. Above you. And in front of you. As you. As a church family.

Seek to live. And speak. For Jesus. In the days ahead. Let's pray. Do not be afraid.

But go on speaking. And do not be silent. For I. Am. With you. Thank you. Heavenly Father. That down the years. And in the years ahead.

This promise. Will remain sure. May it bring us. The kind of assurance. We need. So that we would be those. Who press on to the end. Speaking.

With courage. With clarity. With love. For people. Who at yet this point. Don't. Know you. As Lord and Savior. So help us we pray.

[ 32 : 23 ] In Jesus name. Amen. Vlog. God. Would. So. God. God. Jesus. God. God. God. God. Be those who? God. Lord and Savior. And Jehovah.

God. God.

God.