

Christ's Presence with His Witnesses

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[0 : 00] Please leave your Bibles open to Acts chapter 18 as we continue in the book of Acts. Well, I wonder whether you've ever wondered what other people get up to in their jobs if it was not your kind of work.

Because often we see only the public side of their job, and we don't get to see what they might do behind the scenes. So take, for example, professional tennis players.

I don't know how many of you actually know a tennis professional. But what does a day in the life of a tennis pro look like? Now we see the matches they play on TV, pretty obvious.

Then maybe the press interviews that they do afterwards. But we often don't appreciate all the other things that they have to do. The training, strength, fitness, techniques, mental coaching, or even the less glamorous part of their work, like packing their own bags when they travel.

Probably maybe not that bit if they can pay someone to do that for them. But the drug tests, they have to do those themselves. We hope. A few weeks ago, I was at a conference where a Christian builder shared what his work was like.

[1 : 26] Now, you know, when we think about builders, we think, you know, they spend all their time, all they do is be on the tools, right? But actually, he said a lot of his time was spent doing paperwork, like best statements, sending invoices, writing up quotes.

He also had to do a lot of work dealing with his apprentices and their private lives, you know, because otherwise they wouldn't turn up for their job the next day.

Now, of course, some of you might well ask, what does a day in the life of a pastor look like? Besides writing sermons, preparing Bible studies, conducting weddings, funerals, and baptisms, and for me, riding my bike?

Well, today we get a glimpse of Paul's life as a missionary. Not just a day, but a fuller picture of his work. That's beyond just what we see in the preaching in front of crowds.

And today, we also see how Paul's missionary work begins to evolve into a rather more mature ministry. So let's dive into it. Verse 1 of chapter 18.

[2 : 42] 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, that's the emperor, had ordered all Jews to leave Rome.

Paul went to see them, and because he was a tent maker as they were, he stayed and worked with them. So first, we see the plight of the Jews under Roman rule. As Jews, Priscilla and Aquila had just been expelled from Rome.

We're not quite sure whether it was because they were Christian Jews or just Jews, but we know from other sources at the time that there was unrest among the Jews in Rome because the gospel has caused disagreement among them.

Some believed, some didn't, and they were arguing. And so, rather similar to the effect that Paul's preaching had in the other cities, it had caused a lot of ruction and brought that to the attention of the officials.

We can even see similarities with the apostles' teaching, can't we, in Jerusalem, just after the day of Pentecost. In any case, Paul finds Priscilla and Aquila in Corinth, and it isn't long before they become gospel partners.

[3 : 59] But as we read, here's a picture of Paul's life you might not have appreciated. You see, Paul here was working for a living to preach the gospel.

He was a tent maker, a tradie, the same as Aquila and Priscilla. And Luke mentions this here because he's referring to the fact that when Paul first gets to Corinth, he was without financial support.

Now, perhaps the money that was given to him in Antioch as he was being sent, maybe that had run out. And in previous cities, Paul had been hosted, if you recall, by new believers.

So Lydia in Philippi or Jason in Thessalonica, they had put him up and probably provided for him and his team. But here in Corinth, there was no one to do that.

Now, Aquila and Priscilla was willing to put him up, but I imagine that because they had just been expelled from Rome, they probably had to start over again. And so Paul had to roll up his sleeves with them.

[5 : 05] And so that meant, I think, working probably five, six days a week during the week. And then on the Sabbath, that's when he preached at the synagogue.

So verse 4, every Sabbath, he reasoned in the synagogue trying to persuade Jews and Greeks. And it's only after Silas and Timothy arrives that Paul preaches full time.

For that's what we read in verse 5. When Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia, Paul devoted himself exclusively to preaching, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Messiah.

And I think that's made possible because Silas and Timothy probably brought some financial aid with them. So it's not quite the picture that I have of Paul, is it?

Because he's not really like me, able to do my job without having to do a day job, but rather more like you, holding down a day job during the week and then using his after hours to preach the gospel.

[6 : 06] He's doing it on an, in one says, unpaid and volunteer basis. And having to find other means, like you all have to, to provide for yourselves. And that takes quite a bit of dedication, doesn't it?

Only when the support arrives, does Paul then dedicate himself fully or exclusively to gospel work. And even here, I think what's happened is that Silas and Timothy probably had to do their own fundraising for the team in order to live.

And that's similar to many of our gospel partners, isn't it? People that work for AFES or Enoch next year when he works for Power to Change or some of our apprentices, they have to raise money before they can go work on campus without then also having to do a day job.

So that's hard work, especially given that Paul, he worked five or six days and then on the Sabbath, I don't think he was just preaching one sermon, I'm done now, 20 minutes, get off, go home.

No, he was there probably the whole day, preaching every Sabbath without fail, no break. And what's more, he was doing it in the midst of significant opposition, which is what now we read in verse 6.

[7 : 23] For when they 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 innocent of it. From now on, I will go to the Gentiles.

And then Paul left the synagogue and went next door to the house of Titius Justice, a worshipper of God. Now, Crispus, the synagogue leader, and his entire household believed in the Lord, and many of the Corinthians who heard Paul believed and were baptized.

Now, Paul's words to his own people here reflect his obligation to them. That's why he's compelled to share the gospel to the Jews first.

And yet, he's also called as an apostle to the Gentiles. And what he's saying here is that because I'm not able to persuade my own people, the Jews, to come work with me to reach the Gentiles, well, that's fine.

It's on your own head whether you believe or not, but I'm going to go to the Gentiles myself. So what he does is he's moved next door to Titius Justice House.

[8 : 26] And it's interesting, isn't it, because a number of those in the synagogue follow him. And in particular, Crispus, who is actually a synagogue leader. So, actually, the picture is not that everyone in the synagogue opposed the gospel.

Even one of the leaders of the synagogue did believe, and many other Corinthians as well followed and were baptized. So I think the move next door was due more to the fact that the synagogue as a place of ministry was just not conducive for discipleship.

You see, Paul was getting bogged down, wasn't he? Arguing with the detractors who were being abusive to him, when here there were many people with their minds and hearts open to the gospel, needing to be taught and to grow in their faith.

But I imagine, though, that moving next door, even though it was better than being in the synagogue, still carried a level of stress, doesn't it? Imagine, I mean, I'm in a church now where the members love me, I hope.

And there's no one out there, right, policing who's coming in and, oh, you know. But that was probably, I don't know what's, imagine, but next door, the synagogue, whether they were picketing or they were taking down names of Jews that went in or whatever.

[9 : 44] But you can imagine that it was probably quite stressful, isn't it? And so I think it was taking its toll on Paul, which then necessitated the Lord appearing to him in a vision in verse 9.

And 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 in Corinth for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God. Now here we see a bit of a change of tech from Paul, isn't it? Because if you recall what happened in the past, whenever opposition arose in any city, what did Paul end up doing?

He ended up leaving, didn't he? Moving on. He may have left others to continue the work, but Paul himself seemed to have been a bit of a lightning rod. And so he was going and leaving because he didn't want to have this fledgling church that had formed continue to face opposition and unrest. But this time around in Corinth, God tells him to stay. And I think here's another decisive moment in Paul's ministry. Now if you recall the last vision that Paul had, God had, in one sense, told him to change direction, didn't he?

[11 : 06] Not continue to minister in Asia, but to move to Macedonia because of the Macedonian men inviting him over to Greece for the first time. Now this time the vision prompts another change, but this time in strategy.

Paul remains, but now more to be a church builder, a pastor teacher rather than just being an itinerant evangelist. And he stays for one and a half years, which is a rather long period, relatively speaking.

But let's also consider what the assurance to him was. For the Lord told Paul not to be afraid, but to keep speaking. Why? Firstly, because the Lord was with him.

But also because no harm will come to Paul by staying, because the Lord says that he had many people in the city. Meaning that there are people that God had strategically placed in the city who will do his will when the time comes, even if unwittingly.

And that's exactly what we see next in verse 12. But while Galio was pro-council of Achaia, the Jews of Corinth made a united attack on Paul and brought him to the place of judgment.

[12 : 20] This man, they charge, is persuading the people to worship God in ways contrary to the law. And just as Paul was about to speak, Galio said to them, 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 drove them away. Now, it turns out then that Galio is one of those people that God is talking about, isn't it?

Now, if you read, I think Galio doesn't really care for Paul. But, you know, God was using him anyway. Basically, Galio saw the dispute as one that was internal to them between just the Jews and Paul.

And so he didn't want to get involved. Like, you know, stop wasting my time. It's your own little argument. You go and sort it out yourselves. Don't trouble me. Now, so much so that even when the crowd turned on Sosinus, so I think what's happening here is that the crowd probably was pushing Sosinus to go and, you know, agitate to get Paul arrested and all that.

But when Galio didn't listen to Sosinus, well, the crowd turned on Sosinus like you didn't do your job properly. But even then, Galio didn't want to get involved either.

[13 : 37] So he was a bit of a I don't care kind of pro-council, isn't it? But despite all that, God was at work, wasn't it, with the people in the city, as it were. And so the attempts of the Jews to stop Paul came to nothing because God was with Paul.

And so Paul's ministry could grow, become more effective, as he was able to stay and do good work building up the church. Eventually, though, Paul decided it was time to move on.

And if you look at the slide, Corinth, a bit small, but I think you can see it maybe on your handout as well. Corinth is down on the west side, near the south of Greece, really.

And so you see that Paul really had nowhere else to go, whether it's west or south, is it? I mean, there's the whole peninsula, but Corinth was the main city. And so what he does is that he heads back across, back to Asia and on his way to Syria, which he intended to go to anyway.

And so what we read in the final section here, verse 18, is that Paul stayed on in Corinth for some time. Then he left the brothers and sisters and sailed for Syria, accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila. [14:48] Before he sailed, he had his hair cut off at Sancria because of a vow he had taken. They arrived at Ephesus where Paul left Priscilla and Aquila. He himself went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews.

When they asked him to spend more time with them, he declined. But as he left, he promised, I will come back if it is God's will. And then he set sail for Ephesus. And when he landed at Caesarea, he went to Jerusalem and greeted the church and then went down to Antioch.

Now, Sancria is not on the map, but it's right next to Corinth. It's actually the point of departure from Greece across to Ephesus, which is in Asia Minor. Now, people have asked, what is this vow about that Paul took?

Well, we're not quite sure. It could have been an acknowledgement of God's promise in Corinth. He made a vow there and therefore he was fulfilling it by cutting off his hair. Or it could be related to something going forward that he wanted to do in Syria.

And so he takes a vow and takes a haircut in Sancria. So we don't really know. Maybe the barbers were good at Sancria. I don't know. But when Paul then arrives at Ephesus, I think he was only meant to stay there for a short while.

[16:00] Probably this was a reconnaissance trip of sorts. He nevertheless did some limited preaching there. And then afterwards he leaves Aquila and Priscilla there. And although the Ephesians wanted him to stay, he says, look, I've got more pressing matters in Syria, but if the Lord wills, I will come back.

And so he sets sail. He lands in Caesarea, which is quite far south, really, when he wanted to really go to Antioch in Syria. But what he does is then he heads down south to Jerusalem and then heads back up to Antioch, which is his home church, the one that sent him on this second missionary journey.

So that's really it of the passage. It's sort of, again, another one of those in-between passages where Luke gives a lot of, not much detail, but just quickly snapshot of where Paul went here and there.

But what we get a sense of is that the growing, that what is resulting is there is a growing network of churches, isn't there? Not all of them are started by Paul, but he makes an attempt to stay connected with them all.

He could have just gone straight to Antioch from Caesarea, but no, he heads down south to see the apostles so that he could encourage them and update them as to where the gospel was around the rest of the empire.

[17:21] And then, no doubt, when he returns to Antioch, I mean, he would have also given them a full report. And that's the sense that you get, don't you, when you read the rest of Paul's letters, because he's always trying to encourage fellowship and connection, isn't he, among the churches in the Roman world.

He's making appeals on behalf of one church to another. He's sending greetings from one group of Christians to another church. And that's because he knows, doesn't he, that all these people, some of whom he's ministered to along the way, are all united in Christ, one body, one family of God, whether Jew or Gentile.

And at the same time, we also see, as I said, his ministry maturing, because now Paul begins to have a team, or teams even, of co-workers that are expanding across Asia Minor and Greece.

So, as we've seen, Silas and Timothy, they've been traveling independently of Paul and still working together. They're all sort of coordinating, but Silas and Timothy have gone off on their own.

Even Priscilla and Aquila, whom Paul had just picked up in Corinth, now they've gone to Ephesus, and they're remaining there to encourage and start up a church.

[18:39] And Paul himself, he's probably traveling with Luke, and then he's crisscrossing the empire, building up churches wherever he goes. And so the picture is that, while the book of Acts rightly focuses on Paul as God's apostle to the Gentiles, we also see others at work.

Paul isn't the only witness for Jesus, is he? The team is growing, and when we come back next week, we'll see even more people join. So, this is a picture, isn't it, of God's growing, his mission growing and expanding, and God's church growing and expanding with it.

God's work, God's sovereign plan of salvation is taking shape and getting more sophisticated, more mature, when more and more people get on board.

Well, with all that in mind, what I want to do now is, I guess, ask ourselves how we can apply this passage. There's a number of things we could consider, but one question I think I'd like to consider is whether we have the same assurance of God's presence with us.

Because after all, none of us have had the same vision as Paul. I don't think so. No? Anyone? No one. I didn't either.

[19 : 57] So, what encouragement then can we have that as Christians, God's presence is with us, especially when things become difficult? Well, for that, I want to just, I guess, run through a few passages in the Bible.

Because, if you do, you will notice that God has a habit of promising his presence to his people. Not just here, but across time, across the history of his people.

And often, it's accompanied, like it is here, by a command not to be afraid, but to keep obeying him and speaking his word. So, the first example is Joshua 1, verse 8.

If you recall, as Joshua was entering the promised land, God says, keep this book of the law always on your lips. Meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to read everything, or sorry, to do everything written in it.

Then you will be prosperous and successful. Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid. Do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.

[21 : 09] Likewise, in Jeremiah 1, verse 7, which we'll read for us tonight, Jeremiah was given this promise. Do not say, I am too young. You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you.

And again, do not be afraid of them. Why? For I am with you and will rescue you. So, here, a young Jeremiah has been commissioned to prophesy against a rebellious Israel.

And finally, we have in Matthew 28, verse 18 to 20, which you all know, the Great Commission.

Jesus, again, gives his disciples a commission to preach the gospel.

And he says, all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit and teaching them to do everything I have commanded you.

And the promise, surely, I am with you always to the very end of the age. And of course, having studied Acts now for some months and weeks, his presence comes in the person of the Holy Spirit, doesn't it?

[22 : 21] Poured out on Pentecost as promised there on the slide, Acts chapter 1, verse 8. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

End of the age, ends of the earth. But again, notice that the promise of his presence is to enable us to speak, isn't it?

To be his witnesses and also to live as his disciples, both in word and deed, to preach the gospel.

And the encouragement not to be afraid is appropriate, isn't it?

Because when we follow Jesus, often it comes with risks to our comfort and our safety because there might be rejection or opposition to the message that we bring.

And this assurance is a guarantee that we will never suffer, but it's a comfort for us to know that God will not forsake nor forget us.

[23 : 26] So in answer to my question, we don't need a vision specifically for us and for our situation because we already have God's word to assure us that the Lord Jesus will always be with us by his spirit until the end of the age.

but it's always important to realize that we're being given God's presence to respond as his witnesses, to live as his witnesses, to live courageously as his disciples, to speak and not be silent, to, like Jeremiah, in your cases, not think we're too young, but to keep declaring the gospel even when there is opposition.

Now I'm pretty sure that most of us wouldn't find ourselves in the same situation as Paul. We're not much of a lightning rod, I hope. Rather, our opportunities will be more in one-to-one situations, isn't it?

Less confrontational context, but which still require us to speak and not be afraid when we do so.

Just a couple of weeks ago, I was at a dinner where the lady I sat next to, let's just call her Chris, she shared her testimony of how she brought someone to Christ.

Her daughter goes to a Christian school and she had a friend at school who wasn't from a Christian home. Anyway, as it turned out, this friend's mother invited Chris and her husband to their home for dinner one time.

[24 : 59] And as they were chatting about things that the girls were learning at school and things like that, Chris sort of mentioned something that her daughter had picked up in Christian education. And so this mother asked Chris this question.

She said, Is it true that God loves my daughter more than I do? Now, as Chris was sharing, she said it was really tempting to just fudge the answer at that point, right?

Say something that's not too offensive to the host and say, you know, I'm sure you love your daughter very much too. Something like that. After all, she did say as well that when she first met this lady at their daughter's play date, this lady had driven up in her car and the license plate had spelt B-I-T-C and I'll leave you to fill in the last letter yourself.

So it was a bit daunting, but Chris decided to pluck up the courage and so what she said was, yes, I believe God loves my daughter more than I ever can.

And that, you know, I don't know whether you think that was such a courageous thing to do or not, but that ability just to speak forthrightly and honestly without trying to fudge the answer opened up a conversation and one thing led to another and this mother is now a Christian.

[26 : 30] in the same life group as Chris. And it all happened because she was willing to take that risk rather than beat about the bush and be afraid of offending the host.

Now, I know many of you have shared with me how you've intentionally wanted to be a witness for Jesus, whether it's at work or at college or whatever, and that's really encouraging for me to hear. But I wonder whether like me, you sometimes hesitate to speak forthrightly because, you know, you feel like you don't want to be too pushy, you don't want to jeopardize a friendship or something like that.

Well, let's take heart from today's passage, isn't it? We don't have to be afraid, not just of the reaction there and then or even the reactions afterwards because the Lord has promised that he will always be with us as his witness.

I'm not saying that every time you do that that you'll get the same outcome, but, you know, to speak forthrightly in a gracious way is not being pushy. And, you know, that might just be the opportunity for someone who is interested to start that conversation with us that will see them eventually enter God's kingdom.

[27 : 46] And what a great and wonderful thing that would be if God were to allow that. Let's pray. Father, thank you for the privilege of being your children and calling us to be your witnesses to Jesus.

Give us the courage to speak. Remind us of your presence. Help us not to be afraid. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.