

Christ's Sovereign Presence

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[0 : 00] Well, please turn in your Bibles back to Acts 18, although the verses will also be on the screen for those online. My youngest daughter is doing a subject at school called outdoor education, which involves going on hikes, bushwalks, rock climbing, even whitewater rafting.

Sounds pretty exciting. And all these trips, they are meant to have a guide who stays with them and whose presence is meant to reassure or encourage them.

Except some of the guides have turned out to be rookies. And so on one hike, this rookie guide suggested they camp in a particular place which was too low lying.

And so when it rained overnight, the tents flooded and filled with leeches. In fact, my daughter woke up in the morning with a leech on her lip. And whitewater rafting, here she is on the whitewater raft. She's in the red circle and the guide at the back, because that's where you steer the raft from at the back. And my daughter said that the guide was a lovely girl, but apparently a rookie.

[1 : 08] And so right after this photo, she accidentally steered the raft into some rocks and they capsized. It was all fun, though, in the end. And so her presence, though, wasn't particularly reassuring.

Well, today we'll see that we don't have a rookie guide, but a sovereign Lord whose presence is reassuring, is encouraging, because he continues to provide and abide.

But first, let me remind you of where we are in Acts. We're towards the end of Paul's second missionary journey. In fact, in verse 22, which we're not going to get to today, he returns to Antioch, which ends the journey.

Antioch was his base, if you like, where he sets out from, goes around and comes back to. But the writer, Luke, has grouped the history of the early church, not just by geography, but also by summary, summary statements, which I've shown you before, like on the screen.

So the word of the God spread or the churches were strengthened and so on. And today we are here just after 16.5 summary statement and heading towards this whole section will be summarized by chapter 19, verse 20.

[2 : 22] Notice the emphasis, mightily and prevailed. And so how will this happen?

Well, the verse says, verse 20 there, in this way. But what way? Well, the way that we've seen over the last few weeks. For example, in chapter 16, it's by Christ who opens doors, whether it's doors for mission, like in Macedonia.

If you remember the vision that Paul had, or whether it's opening hearts like Lydia. That's what we're told in Acts 16. Or whether it's literally opening prison doors for Paul and Silas, like with the Philippian jailer.

That's how the word will keep growing and prevailing. And over the last two weeks, we've also seen it's by the way people persuade that Jesus is the Christ.

As Paul persuades others that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the King, who will save and judge. Firstly, to the Jews, using the scriptures in Thessalonica and Berea.

[3 : 26] Or whether it's persuading the Gentiles, the non-Jews, using logic and the resurrection in Athens last week. It's in these ways, the word of the Lord grows mightily and prevails.

And this week, it's by the sovereign presence of Christ that the word will grow and prevail. Why?

Well, because firstly, his sovereign presence provides.

Point one, verse one. So verse one, after this, after Paul spoke at the Areopagus, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. Now, just a bit of background on Corinth.

It's part of Greece today. It was bigger than Athens at the time of Paul and it was more prosperous. It had lots of trade, mainly to do with its position on the coast.

It's the yellow dot on the screen there. And you can notice it's got, it could have a port on both sides, the kind of northwestern or the southeastern side.

[4 : 27] In fact, the bit of land there was so thin that they actually built a road across it so that they could cart ships, small ships and boats across the land and save them sailing 200 miles around the bottom of Sparta through dangerous seas.

And in fact, today, it's no longer a road. It's the Corinthian channel. They've actually dug it out. And it is still, I believe, used today. He is a cruise liner sailing very close.

But it's being dragged, actually, through the Corinth channel. Corinth also held the Isthmian Games with brought travelers and business and lots of gambling. And as a cosmopolitan city, it had a culture completely opposite to Christ.

In fact, the temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love, was there, complete with hundreds of her temporal prostitutes. And so sexual immorality became synonymous with Corinth.

It was known for that. In fact, in other words, it was like the Las Vegas of the ancient world. You know, bright lights, big city, plenty of sinful activity.

[5 : 36] And so you can imagine Paul arriving in the city by himself with a culture opposite to Christ and feeling perhaps a bit overwhelmed.

And so it seems Christ provides some people to work and encourage him. So verse 2 and 3. There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because the emperor Claudius had ordered all the Jews to leave Rome.

Paul went to see them, and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them. Here Paul meets some people to stay and work with.

And I don't know if you noticed, but this seems like quite a coincidence to me. Aquila and Priscilla have just come from Rome themselves, and yet they just so happen to meet Paul in this big city, and they just so happen to be just like Paul.

I mean, they're both Jews, they're both tentmakers, and as we'll see, they're both Christians. And so now Paul has someone to stay with and work with, and they can encourage one another.

[6 : 46] Is this just a coincidence, or is Luke subtly showing us the Lord Jesus' sovereign presence, controlling and orchestrating to provide for his people?

It reminds me of Helen Baxter's daughter Hannah, who went to London by herself. One night she went to the theatre by herself. London's a pretty big city, right? She went to the theatre by herself and just so happened to sit next to a girl whom they got chatting with, and they suddenly found they had all these things in common.

And so they thought, oh, well, maybe we should catch up again, and they exchanged emails. But before they contacted each other, a few days later on Sunday, they just so happened to turn up to the same church and then see each other.

And now they're friends who can encourage one another. Of course, the context here in Acts is providing co-workers to encourage and help each other preach the gospel.

And Jesus continues to do this for us today. In fact, I was thinking of counting everyone who serves here at church as a co-worker to help preach the gospel in this place.

[7 : 54] But I ran out of time because there's so many of you. It's terrific. We could do with a bit more help with kids' church. But this is how the gospel will continue to grow and prevail as Christ provides people to be co-workers, to work together for the sake of the gospel.

And so Paul makes tents with Priscilla and Aquila during the week. And then on verse 4, on the weekend, on Saturday, the Sabbath, he reasoned in the synagogue trying to persuade Jews and Jewish Greeks, or Greeks who become Jews, basically.

Now, as we'll see shortly, Paul seeks to persuade them that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, the King who saves and will judge. But it's interesting that he's actually at this point more like you than like me.

You know, he goes to work during the week. And even if you're retired, you end up working during the week, don't you? That's what I keep hearing from people. And then he does ministry on the weekend. But this changes when the Lord Jesus provides money from Macedonia.

Verse 5. When Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia, Paul devoted himself exclusively to preaching, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Messiah.

[9 : 13] Now, this verse doesn't mention money, does it? But notice there is a change. He no longer makes tents during the week, but he devotes himself exclusively to preaching full time.

And we know when Paul wrote the second Corinthians, the letter to the Corinthians, the second one, where he has to defend himself, this is what he says in 2 Corinthians 11. You know, I robbed. He didn't really rob, but he took money from other churches. And notice he says, I was not a burden to any of you Corinthians, for the brothers, Silas and Timothy, who came from Macedonia, supplied what I needed.

And so putting the two together, that seems to be what is happening here in verse 5. Christ providing money so that Paul can devote himself exclusively to preaching the gospel.

And Christ continues to do this today. In fact, he has used you and your generosity to help our link missionaries to preach the gospel full time and to help us as a staff team preach the gospel full time.

[10:28] In fact, just last month, I think it was, we had two different people who both gave us \$10,000 each to help the new 5 p.m. congregation at St. John's next year.

Isn't that terrific? This is how the gospel will continue to grow and prevail, as the sovereign Lord Jesus provides financial supporters.

But the Lord Jesus doesn't just provide co-workers and financial supporters, he also provides places for the church to meet. And so in verse 6 to 7, we read this.

But when they, the Jews, opposed Paul and became abusive, he shook out his clothes in protest and said to them, Your blood be on your own heads.

I am innocent of it. From now on, I will go to the Gentiles. Then Paul left the synagogue and went next door to the house of tedious justice, a worshipper of God.

[11:30] Now in verse 6, where Paul says he will no longer go to the Jews, but to the Gentiles, he's talking about in this city of Corinth. Every time he goes to a new city, he always goes to the synagogue first.

In fact, if you've got your Bibles open, in verse 19, that's what he does when he gets to Ephesus. He goes to the synagogue first. But here in Corinth, when they oppose him, he shakes his clothes at them, which is a way of shaking off his responsibility towards them as an apostle.

As verse 6 says, Your blood be on your own heads. And what Paul is doing here is alluding to this problem of what Ezekiel says in Ezekiel chapter 33.

And I wonder if there is a bit of a theological principle for us here. We don't have Paul's responsibility as an apostle, but we are to do what we can to make disciples.

This will look different for each of us depending on our situation and our opportunities. It might mean just trying to make disciples of our kids or grandkids, our nieces or nephews, or taking opportunities with friends or work colleagues at lunchtime.

[12:41] But I wonder if they reject us, I wonder if we've then fulfilled our responsibility towards them. You know, I wonder if, sadly, their blood will be on their own heads.

Which again, sadly, I know is the case for a number of our adult children. It doesn't mean, don't mishear me, it doesn't mean we stop praying for them or stop trying with them. We'll see an encouragement to do that shortly.

But I wonder if it means we've fulfilled our responsibility. The thing that is really worth noticing is what happens in verse 7. Paul is kicked out of the synagogue.

He no longer has a place to preach. But does he have to go very far to find another place? No, he goes right next door. I mean, isn't that amazing?

Is that a coincidence? Or is that the Lord Jesus, again, providing a place for the church to meet? Again, he keeps doing this today.

[13:41] I remember when we were running out of rooms for our youth ministry and the Wednesday night young adult Bible study groups to meet. And it just so happened to be around the time that David and Esther were hoping to move out of the vicarage into another unit to plan for retirement.

And so we had this empty space that we could now use for our youth ministry and Bible study groups and so on. And it is literally right next door, isn't it?

Christ's sovereign presence provides people to be co-workers, money from financial supporters, places for churches, and he even provides people who will believe.

And so have a look in verse 8. Crispus, the synagogue leader, and his entire household believed in the Lord. And many of the Corinthians who heard Paul believed and were baptised.

Notice who Crispus is. Who is he? He's the synagogue leader of all people. I mean, to put it into perspective, do you know the mosque down on George Street, just down from Doncaster East Secondary College?

[14:52] It would be like the imam, the leader of the mosque, and his entire household becoming Christians. It's really quite surprising, isn't it? And yet this is what happens.

And if Christ can convert Crispus, a synagogue leader, then he can convert anyone, can't he? Even those loved ones who seem so hard towards the gospel.

You know, those tough nuts to crack, as one of our church members described his adult children. And so it's still worth praying for them, still worth sharing with them as we have opportunity, even if we've fulfilled our responsibility towards them.

But the point is, Christ's sovereign presence provides people who will believe, like Crispus and many Corinthians. And he still does that today, does he not? Yes, in the West, we've grown very hard towards the gospel.

And so we do see less conversions, but we still see some. At our 10.30 congregation, we're having a baptism at the end of the month. At our 5 p.m. congregation, we've already had three baptisms a couple of weeks ago.

[15:59] We've got another two tonight. And we see it even more so amongst our Chinese and Persian ministries. It was just a couple of months ago that our Chinese ministry baptized 21 people.

And so the Lord Jesus still provides people to believe, doesn't he? Christ's sovereign presence still provides co-workers, financial supporters, places for churches and people who will believe.

This, in this way, the gospel, the word of the Lord, will continue to grow mightily and prevail. But it's also because Christ's presence abides with us.

So more briefly, point to verse 9 to 11. 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.

[17:06] Now, Paul had reason to fear. He just started a church right next door to the synagogue he was kicked out of and persuaded the leader of the synagogue to join him.

And so no wonder the Jews were jealous. And so Jesus says to him, do not be afraid. And in fact, he says twice to speak. In the negative, do not be silent.

In the positive, keep on speaking. Why? Verse 10, for or because I am with you. In other words, Christ's presence is still with him.

Christ stays or abides by him. And so he need not fear nor be silent. And in this case, Christ adds an additional promise of protection.

In verse 10, he says, and no one is going to physically attack or harm you, which we see fulfilled in a rather surprising way.

[18:09] And so in verse 12, while Galio was pro-council of Achaia, the Jews of Corinth made a united attack. That is not a physical attack, but a kind of political attack on Paul and brought him to the place of judgment.

This man they charged is persuading the people to worship God in ways contrary to the Old Testament law. 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 off.

Here Paul faces opposition from the Jews again. And just as he's about to speak and defend himself in verse 14, he doesn't have to, does he?

The pagan politician, Galio, steps in and defends him. It's so unexpected. It's got to be Christ's sovereignty at work behind the scenes, doesn't it?

[19:17] I remember when the Bible Society wanted to run some conversations around the same time of the same-sex marriage vote in 2017, and people went nuts on social media.

The Bible Society kind of did a thing with Cooper's Beer. I think the owners were Christians or something or other. And people at pubs were literally pouring down Cooper's Beer down the drain in protest. It went nuts.

But it was actually a non-Christian practicing homosexual MP who stood up for the Bible Society. He rightly said, hang on guys, this is silly.

We should be able to talk about these things in a loving and gentle way. We should be able to discuss different opinions. And he's right. We should be. But the point is, it was so unexpected, I wonder if this was another God incident.

God working behind the scenes through pagan politicians to defend his people. And so Christ still sometimes does this. And ironically, here, instead of Paul being beaten up, look what happens in verse 17.

[20 : 26] Then the crowd there turned on Sosthenes, the synagogue leader, and beat him in front of the pro-council. And Galio showed no concern whatsoever.

Now, here, the Jews and Sosthenes bring Paul to get thrown in prison and beaten up, and then the reverse happens, doesn't it? And Galio doesn't care, whether it's because he didn't like the Jews or more likely he was just simply lazy.

Here is Christ's sovereignty providing protection in fulfillment of his promise. But we need to notice here that this promise of protection is limited to that situation.

I mean, it wasn't that long ago when Paul was in Philippi, the end of chapter 16, where he was beaten severely and flogged and stripped and thrown in prison.

I mean, I'd call that physical harm, wouldn't you? Of course, Christ can use such persecution to grow the gospel like he did in Philippi. The Philippian jailer and the whole household became Christians, didn't they?

[21 : 31] Or he uses it to move Paul into a new region to proclaim the gospel. He does the same thing today. But it seems here in Corinth, Jesus wanted many saved now.

He had many chosen people in this city ready and waiting to hear the gospel, and he wanted them saved right then and then. And so in this situation, he gave this promise of protection.

And we need to realize that because while Jesus may choose to do that for us from time to time, like with the Bible Society, it's not a promise he gave Paul for every situation, nor a promise he gives us for every situation.

I mean, we may and probably will suffer for being a Christian from time to time. I mean, it's happening now around the world, isn't it? But what Jesus does give us is a promise to abide with us always.

Remember these famous verses from the end of Matthew's gospel? He says, all authority has been given to me. I've got complete sovereignty, complete control. Therefore, go and make disciples.

[22 : 38] And notice at the end, and surely I am with you always. To the very end of the age. The age hasn't ended, has it?

Which means he's still with us. Jesus abides with us to help us and use us and our efforts, whether big or small, whether we're family or friends, whether we walk away and wish we had said this or that.

Has that ever happened to you? You had a conversation, oh, I should have said that, or I should have added this. The fact that Jesus is with us means we're not alone in doing what we can to make disciples.

He can still use us and our efforts, which is reassuring, isn't it? Encouraging. It helps us, encourages us not to fear nor keep silent.

One of our members recently found themselves in hospital. And while the situation was more serious than I think he thought, he was not fearful of what the doctors might find.

[23 : 39] Well, that's what he told me. Christ was with him and reassured him. And what's more, it also helped him not fear speaking to the nurses. And knowing Christ was with him helped him not keep silent.

And so he didn't. He spoke to several nurses, he mentioned. Gently, lovingly, he spoke to them. And while some were not interested, Christ did provide one who was, who asked questions.

And so there in the hospital bed on his iPad, I think it was, he was able to email this nurse or show her or something or other, something that he had written explaining who Jesus was.

I don't know if this nurse became a Christian. He came out of hospital. So I haven't caught up on the rest of the story. I'll have to ask you afterwards, Graham. But you see, knowing that Jesus is with us encourages us not to fear nor keep silent.

Living in Melbourne as a Christian may sometimes feel overwhelming. But Christ's sovereign presence still provides and abides with us now, just as it did for Paul then.

[24 : 49] And so the big application really is be reassured, be encouraged. He'll firstly still provide for us so that we can make disciples. In fact, as faithful prayers and fellow co-workers and financial supporters, you are Christ's provision to others so that they can make disciples too.

And secondly, he'll abide with us always. And he's not like a rookie whitewater rafting guide, is he? He's the sovereign Lord who has all authority. And so that is reassuring, encouraging, isn't it? So even if we may suffer, we need not fear nor stay silent.

But as we have opportunity, gently speak of Christ that he may use us to make more disciples. For it is in this way that the word of the Lord will grow mightily and prevail.

Let's pray. Our gracious Heavenly Father, we thank you for this reminder this morning of Christ's sovereign presence, which continues to provide and abide, that we might be encouraged to do what we can to see people come to you.

[26 : 11] And so, Father, we pray that you would help us to remember this great encouragement. We ask it not for our sake, but for Jesus' sake. Amen.