

Challenging the Religious

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Date: 10 May 2009

Preacher: Wayne Schuller

[0 : 00] I'll pray for us. Lord our God, please help us now to hear from your word and be strengthened in our witness of you and encouraged to be bold for the sake of your son. Amen.

Please have a seat, friends. I'd like to take you on a holiday with me to the Peloponnese Peninsula on the southern coast of Greece. This holiday promises you warm weather, the best beaches of Greece, beautiful food and lots of great things like that.

I've been reading the holiday websites of this area of Greece and I really think I need to be sent on a study trip there. What fascinates me most of all about this peninsula on southern Greece is the history because I love history.

And this place, the Peloponnese Peninsula, contains the highest density of historical sites of anywhere in Greece, so the websites say.

Many of the great civilizations of history have been based or made their mark on this part of the world. So if you know, the Spartans were based here on this peninsula. And the Roman Empire had a significant province and sort of base in this area of the Peloponnese Peninsula.

[1 : 19] And not least, this is where we find Corinth. And so here we are today in our travels with Paul the Apostle in the early or late 40s of the first century.

What the Apostle did was on this second missionary journey, he went counterclockwise around the Mediterranean, around western Turkey and down the southern tip of Greece. A bit of a junket really, if you ask me.

Although he did get beaten up everywhere he went, except for today when someone else steps in for him, as we'll see. And so today we're really focusing on the place of Corinth. Paul has left intellectual Athens and now he has moved west and south to extravagant Corinth.

Corinth was a cosmopolitan Roman outpost. It was wealthy, luxurious, indulgent and promiscuous.

It was home to the famous temple of the Greek goddess Aphrodite. She is the Greek goddess of love and beauty. That's a photo. They got a building program underway, I hope.

[2 : 27] And this was a really dodgy place of the world. And this temple and this worship of this Greek goddess, essentially a worship of sex, shaped the kind of how dodgy and seedy the whole city really was.

I've got a quote from a first century historian called Strabo about Corinth and about this temple. He says, The temple of Aphrodite was so rich that it owned more than a thousand temple slaves, courtesans, whom both men and women had dedicated to the goddess.

What this historian is saying is that this temple was famous for having a thousand prostitutes in this place of worship. You would go and pay money, you'd give your tithe to your god and you'd indulge with a prostitute.

That was the sort of religion this pagan religion was. That's not an unusual thing in the first century. But what is unusual is the quantity of having a thousand temple prostitutes in Corinth in this place.

Imagine it's very famous. And Strabo, the historian, gives us this sort of warning that the sailors used to spread about Corinth, of all people.

[3 : 42] Strabo says, On account of these women in this temple, the city was crowded with people and grew rich. For instance, the ship captains freely squandered their money in Corinth.

And hence the proverb, which everyone knows, Not for every man is the voyage to Corinth. Corinth. And so, unlike most cities of the world, instead of the sailors bringing the corruption with them, Corinth corrupted sailors and they warned each other to be careful.

So you know this must be a pretty seedy, dodgy city. To this city comes our apostle with the message of our saviour.

What boldness of the apostle Paul to come to, of all places, Corinth with the gospel of Jesus Christ. And this is, of course, where we get our letters to 1 and 2 Corinthians as to this place in Corinth.

And I think that's why Paul, maybe why he said in 1 Corinthians, he said, When I first came to you, I came in weakness and fear with much trembling. You know, Paul, you know, you think, Is the gospel really going to be able to impact a city as corrupt and promiscuous as this?

[4 : 55] Not unlike Sydney, really. Because, you know, Melbourne's the best. Now, the actual Peloponnese Peninsula, I've got a zoom-in photo here, or a map of it.

Athens is there sort of in the top, on the top of the right. Athens was an intellectual centre. That's where we were last week with Paul challenging the best philosophers of his day with the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Today, we're not in an intellectual centre, but in a commercial centre. Corinth has access to trade routes by land in the north and south, but also two harbours on either side.

So, there's a lot of business that happens in Corinth. John Stott says, speaking of the strategy of Paul, John Stott says, If trade could radiate from Corinth in all directions, then so could the gospel.

So, this is Paul's evangelistic wisdom and insight as he brings the good news to this sort of sleazy, affluent business centre.

[6 : 04] Paul can see that God could achieve a lot. If you can get a church here preaching the gospel, it can go in all directions. So, this is the wisdom of Paul, that he goes where sailors fear to dread.

So, we find Paul in this chapter, Acts 18, and we find him meeting some new friends that he's been looking to meet. I'll read to you from verse 2. There in Corinth, Paul found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all the Jews to leave Rome, and Paul went to see them.

This is the first mention of Rome in the book of Acts, since Rome was mentioned back at the day of Pentecost in Acts 2, where there were some Jewish people from Rome who'd come to the day of Pentecost, become Christians, and so we just sort of assume that the gospel's gone back to Rome and taken root.

But Paul doesn't know much about this, and he's eager to find news, because Paul wants to get to Rome. The rest of the book of Acts from here on in, Paul is all about getting to Rome to preach the gospel, you know, as far into the heart and hub of the Roman Empire as possible.

And it won't happen in this chapter, it won't happen on this journey, but it will happen later in the book. Now, this mention of Jews being expelled by Claudius out of Rome is something that we can cross-check with independent historical records.

- [7 : 37] So there's a historian called Suetonius, a Roman historian who writes of this event, and it happened in AD 49, and he says this happened, and this is fascinating, because it mentions the Saviour in this record outside the Bible.

This is what Suetonius says. He says, Since the Jews in AD 49 were continually making disturbances at the instigation of Crestus, Emperor Claudius expelled them from Rome.

Which is basically what Luke says. But what Suetonius tells us is that the Jews were kicked out of Rome because they were making disturbances about someone called Crestus.

And now Crestus is sort of a Latinisation of the name Christ. And so what historians think happened was that Jewish Christians were preaching that Jesus is the Christ, and Jews were arguing about whether he was or wasn't, and that argument went public and became a bit of a disturbance.

The emperor got so sick of it, he kicked them all out. And so all these Jewish exiles, Paul would be eager to talk to them and hear about, well, how many Christians are there in Rome?

- [8 : 47] Is there a church? How many house churches are there? Paul would really want to know about what's going on with the gospel in Rome. Although it's exciting, but sadly, there are now no more Christian Jews in Rome because all the Jews have been expelled.

And so Paul goes to see Aquila and Priscilla get the news, and he has something else in common with these people as well, the job. And because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them and they worked together.

By trade, they were tent makers. So this is new in Acts as well. I mean, up until now, Paul's been, he was a sort of a Pharisee, full-time kind of Jewish rabbi slash Christian killer.

Now he's become a full-time Christian missionary. But we learn that Paul also had a trade. His trade was to make tents and sell them or maybe leather goods or something like that.

I think this is Paul's wisdom in that in Corinth and some places, he chose to self-fund his work by the work of his own hands so as not to be a burden on those he's preaching the gospel to.

- [9 : 59] And maybe so that he can show them, and Paul talks about this in the letter to the Corinthians, that he wasn't trying to manipulate them or just be among them for their money. Because certainly a lot of people come to Corinth, con men, wanting to fleece people for the wealth that's there.

Paul works as a tent maker so that he can preach the gospel freely without charge. And this is, of course, where today we get this category of missionary that people talk about.

They say, I'm going to be a tent maker overseas. And what they mean by that is, I'm going to use my vocational work skill to be a Christian witness in another country.

Although interestingly, Paul as a tent maker is still very, very much occupied with proclamation of the word of God and teaching. So he says, Luke says, every Sabbath, Paul would argue in the synagogue and would try to convince Jews and Greeks.

This is gospel ministry. It's arguing. It's trying to persuade people about the truth of the gospel. And Paul is, even though he's a tent maker, he's so much involved in gospel word ministry.

- [11 : 07] It says, Paul is, another way to talk about being occupied, he is absorbed with the word of God.

It's his bread and butter. It's what he's there to do is to bring the word of God to people to speak about Jesus. He's not actually there to be a kind of a tent maker, silent Christian witness, which I think sometimes happens in our category of missions today that our tent makers actually don't do much proclamation of the gospel, but that's not what Paul was doing as a tent maker.

Now, as always, and today I really want to encourage you to be prayerful and mindful of ways that you can speak for Jesus during your week.

The ways that you can tell people that you're a Christian, ways that you can invite people to things, tell people about your faith, tell people about your saviour, that's a good thing to do. Now, when this happens in Acts, and it happens all the time in Acts and happening everywhere in Acts, but there's always some opposition.

And here in Corinth, as Paul would have expected, there is strong opposition. In verse 6, firstly from the synagogue, when they, that is the Jews in the synagogue, opposed and reviled him.

[12 : 34] So they're really slapping Paul in the face, it seems, reviling his message that you can't have a crucified Messiah. He's not Lord. In response to that, in protest, Paul shook the dust from his clothes and said to them, your blood be on your own heads.

I am innocent. From now on, I'll go to the Gentiles. And he leaves the synagogue. Paul is frustrated that people don't respond to the gospel.

In fact, they're responding with insult and they're reviling him. And his response, I think, is God-given in that he's saying to them, I've given you the gospel and you've rejected it.

I'm innocent of your blood. I've fulfilled my duty to you. Paul feels that he owes to these people that they should hear about the Messiah, the King, the Lord Jesus, be saying, I've fulfilled that duty and you have rejected it.

Paul is rightly angry because one of the, I think, you know, one of the biggest sins, if we can rank sins, is contempt of the gospel. Contempt of the word of God.

[13 : 44] Contempt of what God has given in his son. And so they show such contempt of this. That Paul wipes his hands and says, well, I'm not going to come back to this meeting.

You know, I'm done here. So it's with sadness but it's also with some real godly anger and godly indignation. Although, interestingly, Paul's not without fruit.

Some people, maybe a lot, heard the message and believed. Even though he said, I'm not coming back to this meeting, Luke records for us who believed. So in verse 7, Paul left the synagogue and where does he go?

He just goes next door. There's already a house church forming to a house of a man named Titius Justice, a worshipper of God. His house was next door to the synagogue.

And also, this is big as well, Crispus, the official of the synagogue, became a believer in the Lord together with all his household. And many of the Corinthians who heard Paul became believers and were baptised.

[14 : 47] So it's very interesting that Paul wipes his hands of those who reject him in the synagogue and there's sort of a house church being formed just next door. So there's still a gospel witness in Corinth.

The opposition is strong but the ministry just moves from the synagogue to house churches. And that's sort of a trend I think is happening more and more toward this end of the book of Acts.

Many revile Paul but many believe. Now here's the question that faces a lot of missionaries and faces Paul. He has to decide do I stay here and preach the gospel or do I go somewhere else where it might be more fruitful?

Yes, I've got a house church going here but I've wiped my hands with a synagogue. Is it worth staying here in promiscuous, indulgent Corinth or is it better to maybe go back to Jerusalem and go back to Antioch and go back and see how the thriving churches are going?

Well, God gives him an answer. Jesus is going to tell Paul what to do. This sort of rarely happens in the book of Acts actually this such specific guidance but Jesus seems to have a heart for Corinth.

[15 : 58] He doesn't want Paul to give up on Corinth so Jesus comes to him in a dream, a supernatural dream. So one night the Lord said to Paul in a vision, Do not be afraid.

This is Jesus to Paul. Do not be afraid but speak and do not be silent for I am with you and no one there will lay a hand on you to harm you for there are many in the city who are my people.

Jesus appears to Paul in a dream and gives him a mandate to stay in Corinth and also a number of motives to stay in Corinth and preach the gospel.

The first motive is actually a good one. Jesus promises Paul in Corinth that no one will hurt him. That's a great thing so then Paul he can just be unleashed knowing that no one is going to harm him.

Paul is very keen we know from his letter to the Romans for example to get to Rome to preach the gospel and get beyond Rome to keep moving west through Europe and to get to Spain even so Paul doesn't want to die in Corinth for the gospel he wants to preach further and further abroad and so it's good to tell Paul you're not going to get harmed in this city.

[17 : 14] Jesus also says to him very explicit instructions which I think tells a lot about how Jesus uses people in ministry. Jesus says to him do not be afraid but speak and do not be silent.

Paul is told don't be scared. Don't be a coward. Corinth is threatening. Corinth is corrupt. Corinth is hardened to the gospel.

Corinth is an unlikely place to build a Christian church but Jesus says you speak and don't be silent. And why? Because Jesus says because I am with you.

And he's Lord of heaven and earth. If the Lord of heaven and earth is with you you speak. You don't be scared of them. And I think this is why in the letter to the Corinthians 2 Corinthians 5 Paul says since we know what it is to fear the Lord we try to persuade men.

See the logic? If you don't fear the Lord enough you'll fear men and you'll be too afraid to speak. But if you know the power of the risen Lord and you revere that power you fear his majesty you'll persuade men.

[18 : 28] You won't be scared of men. They're nothing compared to Jesus. The fear of the Lord is the one fear that removes all others. And so I think this is a good principle for us to think about in our own expression of telling people about Jesus.

We do that according to our gifts in many different ways. But if you were ever scared and tempted to not share your faith just remember who your Lord is.

Who is with you? The Lord of heaven and earth the one who has defeated death defeated sin Satan he is the one who is with you and works through you as you share your faith.

You ought not to be surprised when you feel fear before men. If he feels too scared to share your faith. I feel that. Paul felt that but Jesus has to say to him don't be afraid I'm with you.

I've been teaching CRE Christian Religious Education for six or seven years and I teach a box hill primary at 2.30 on a Thursday afternoon every week grade five and six about 35 or so of them.

[19 : 40] I feel fear every time I walk into that school yard because I know I'm not in the church anymore. This is unknown territory for the gospel.

These kids have never heard the gospel and so I feel a fear when I bring the Bible into that place and I open the Bible with them. I feel a fear to water it down to dilute it just to have games or something but I have to remind myself of the Lord I serve that he is Lord over even that school and that he wants those people to be saved.

So when you feel that fear when you invite someone for dinner that you've been praying for that you'll get a chance to share the gospel you will feel a fear or a cowardice to not speak but you have to remind yourself who your Lord is and that he is with you.

Now if that were not reason enough to speak about your saviour with those who don't know him and not be silent Jesus gives an even bigger reason why we ought to have some boldness in telling people about the gospel and it comes in verse 10 it's a little small comment but to me it's mind blowing he says I am with you no one will lay a hand on you to harm you because or for there are many in this city who are my people and what is Jesus saying when he says that to Paul don't leave this city because there are many who are my people I don't think he's talking about the church that's next door to the synagogue Jesus is talking about the people that he has prepared to receive the gospel who haven't received it yet Paul can't go he can't leave the city yet because God has prepared people for Paul to preach the gospel too Jesus has chosen people in Corinth to receive the gospel therefore Paul ought to stay with confidence knowing that the ones

Jesus has chosen will come forward and receive the gospel do you see so this is in effect predestination in action election in action that Jesus says I've got chosen people here who haven't yet heard the gospel and received Christ you can't go till they receive the gospel and so Paul is commanded to stay because of predestination isn't that a great thing and it's not a new concept in the book of Acts there's a great verse we've looked at it a few times I think earlier in chapter 13 where Luke says when the Gentiles heard the teaching they were glad and they praised the word of the Lord and as many had been destined for eternal life became believers so earlier in Acts and in several places Luke talks like this that those who Jesus had predestined or chosen ahead of time became believers and this is really just another way of saying that the book of

[22 : 43] Acts is the Acts of Jesus he's the one at work and we are his instrument but he's already prepared the way for the people for us to preach the gospel to now the tricky thing is we can't we're not very good at telling who God has prepared so we have to preach the gospel to everyone because if we were to try and guess who has God got ready to hear the gospel from me we would guess the wrong people we would not guess Corinth we would say oh God's not going to pick anyone from Corinth that seedy promiscuous place we just go on to somewhere else so we must preach the gospel to all knowing that people will respond because of God's sovereign election do you see and so that's why knowing that God chooses people is a great motive to share our faith and Jesus gives it to Paul as a motive for him to stay share your faith because of predestination it applies to this city God did not choose God chose you before you chose him you didn't choose God before he chose you God chose you to receive the gospel and this doesn't take away from your personal responsibility to receive it so for example

Paul in the synagogue they reject the gospel what does he say your blood is on your head you are culpable for rejecting the gospel just because God chooses some doesn't mean that you're not culpable for rejecting him you are Paul says clearly your blood is on your head so both things are true human responsibility and the fact that God does choose there's a great book on this by Anglican called J.I.

Packer called Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God if you want to explore this more that's a great book I'll read you a quote he says this of predestination far from making evangelism pointless the sovereignty of God in grace is the one thing that prevents evangelism from being pointless for predestination creates the possibility indeed the certainty that evangelism will be fruitful and apart from it apart from predestination there is not even a possibility of evangelism being fruitful so Jesus says to Paul stay here speak don't be silent because there are many here who are my people you see that's that's Paul's argument now it goes on and the story goes on to a confrontation in the law courts against Paul's witness Jesus promised Paul no one would harm you but Jesus didn't promise

Paul that no one would attack you and attacks happen in Corinth and a big attack actually comes in verse 12 and 13 this is a very kind of political legal attack on the Christian faith but when Galio was pro-consul of Achaia that's the Roman province the Jews made a united attack on Paul and brought him before the tribunal so they're not very happy with this Christian church next to their synagogue they said to the Galio this man Paul is persuading people to worship God in ways that are contrary to the law in ancient Rome they governed religion and they controlled which religions were legal and which ones weren't and basically to be a legal religion you had to worship the emperor as well as your own religion and the one exemption to that rule was Judaism they were allowed to be monotheist and to keep and to have that freedom of religion that really no one else had in

Rome and they come to the Roman authorities and say these guys are Jews but they don't deserve the rights that we have under Roman law they have a different message to us and so their religion of worshipping Jesus Christ we're not one of them anymore and therefore they are illegal don't give them the rights that we have under Roman law this is a huge threat because if Galio agrees then this will set a precedent in law that may spread across the empire and may block the spread of the gospel westward towards the capital and so this is a huge threat politically to the gospel and legally to the gospel luckily Jesus I think divinely kind of arranges things so that Galio is not favourable to this claim and so Paul doesn't even have to speak he's protected by Jesus just as Paul was about to speak Galio said to the

[27 : 37] Jews if it were a matter of crime or serious villainy I would be justified in accepting the complaint of you Jews but since it is a matter of questions about words and names and your own law see to it yourselves see to it yourselves I do not wish to be a judge of these matters so Galio basically says it's not a this is not an issue about Roman law this is a problem with your Jewish law you know you sort it out amongst yourselves so in effect even though Galio is a bit lazy he's giving Christianity the same legal rights and mandate and freedom that Judaism had under Rome and that's a great win for the gospel and that those rights and freedoms Paul will exploit and use to preach the gospel for the rest of the book now there's somebody always gets beaten up wherever Paul goes can't beat up Paul in Corinth because Jesus is going to protect him somebody else gets beaten up today and I can't even work out whether he's a Christian or not in verse 17 then all of them that is all the Romans just hanging around the courtroom seized Sosthenes the official of the synagogue and beat him in front of the tribunal and Galio paid no attention to any of these things he doesn't really like

Jews anyway probably they're beating up the guy who's brought the claim against Paul and wasted the time of the court they beat him up to teach him a lesson although interestingly in the letter to the Corinthians in almost in the first chapter Paul writes to Sosthenes in Corinth so it seems that this guy ends up becoming a believer at some point anyway if it's the same name so here's where we are friends the gospel has made a huge impact on a corrupt city like Corinth we are encouraged today to speak and not be silent about our faith in Jesus Christ the growth of the gospel goes on and on and on in Acts because Jesus is at work making it happen he's at work in choosing people according to his father's will he's at work in using Paul and using the church Jesus is at work to keep growing the gospel Priscilla and

Aquila are added to Paul's team and they start traveling with him so the gospel team grows and we see very so clearly that Jesus wants his followers to not be afraid of men and to not be silent because of their fear of men but to actually speak to persuade to teach the kind of things Paul was doing to argue and to tell people that Jesus is the Christ the Bible calls Jesus the word of God but it's so encouraging to me to think the word of God Jesus and uses our words he doesn't the word of God wants his people and he wants our people to have words about him and Jesus will use your words and they will never return empty in due time he will bring forth the fruit he's trying to achieve through our words of the gospel I've got to warn you I'm not saying that you'll you have a promise of protection that promise was for Paul in Corinth in

AD 49 and later on Paul probably was killed for the gospel somewhere else and we don't have a promise of protection today or anywhere in the world but we do know that we serve the Lord of heaven and earth that we ought not to fear men if we serve the Lord who is the Lord of every man do you see if he's the forever eternally king then we ought not to be scared of people we ought to process our fears why don't we say more things about our faith at work why are we more timid about telling people what we did on the weekend that we went to church why are we afraid to invite people or to or to give away a book or a Bible something like that process your fears and don't fear man but fear the Lord friends who has God got waiting who has God got waiting for you to invite to church who has God got waiting for you to give a gospel to or to give a

Christian book to who has God got waiting for you to invite to dinner to talk to them about your faith who has God got waiting for you to invite to your Bible study group friends let's speak about Jesus to everyone knowing that in due time he will draw forward the fruit that he's prepared for us in the hearts of people that we would never guess let us speak of Jesus to everyone knowing that God will produce good fruit in his time let's ask him to do that Lord Jesus we praise you that you are still active in the book of Acts and therefore still active today we praise you for your temporary protection on Paul so that the gospel could take root in this unlikely city of Corinth we thank you for challenging us today Lord Jesus to not be silent but to knowing your presence with us to speak and Lord Jesus we thank you that you go ahead of us in all mission in all evangelism through the people that you have elected and predestined to be saved and so we pray that we will go with confidence knowing that there are there are such people in Doncaster and with the hope that they could be anywhere and everywhere we pray Lord

[33 : 25] Jesus that you would do a good work through our witness for your happening again just WATCHED some people in the deep chapters the