

A Long Journey in the Word

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[0 : 00] Well, we've reached a point in the book of Acts where there's going to be a real focus on big cities. And so this chapter 18 and next week 19, we're looking at Corinth and Ephesus.

That's where Paul's going to spend a great deal of time, one and a half years in Corinth and then maybe up to three years in Ephesus. There's two very different types of cities.

One's a commercial business center, which is Corinth, and the other one is a religious center, Ephesus. And I think it's really good timing that we've come to this part of Acts during the winter, or maybe we should call them Summer Olympics here in Vancouver, because there is a focus on the city of Vancouver for the whole world.

There's a spotlight on us. And our city has really experienced a transformation of sorts. I experienced it going down with our seven-year-old son Alexander and Catherine.

We went and saw an afternoon hockey game on Friday. And it was something going down to downtown. It was eye-opening. We spent a couple of hours walking around, seeing the cauldron and all the different activities that they have for the Olympics downtown.

[1 : 19] And it was astounding to see that many people in one place. I've never seen that in Vancouver. Alexander held very tightly to my hand for the whole two hours, so we wouldn't lose each other.

And it was a very friendly, happy atmosphere. People were feeling as though they were part of something very, very special that comes around once in a lifetime. And certainly it is something that makes the city look very different.

And you see all aspects of the city put together in one place. And there is transformation. Now, I think one of the big things we learn in the book of Acts is that cities are very important in God's plan of salvation.

God transforms many people in those cities. It is a transformation that's much deeper and radical and life-changing than being part of a special event like the Olympics.

And in fact, in this chapter, we see the whole list of the major cities of the Roman Empire. So you see that Paul comes from Athens, which is this great city of higher learning.

[2 : 29] And then he goes to Corinth, a city of at least 200,000. On to Ephesus, another city of at least 200,000. To Jerusalem, the oldest city. And he keeps going to Antioch, which is a massive city of about 500,000.

And then Priscilla and Aquila, who we meet in this chapter, come from Rome, which was a city of a million. There wasn't any other city in the Roman world, again, that would be that big until the 1500s, 1600s.

And it was a fairly, this was an aspect of the gospel that's very clear in 18 that good news are transforming all the people in these cities.

Transforming, I should say, people in all of these cities. So in each of the cities, there are people who have been changed by the gospel. And in that nucleus of people, there is something that God is doing with them.

He will bring his goodness, his light, his transforming power into those cities. And you know, Jesus talked about cities as though they were family units.

[3 : 37] As though they were one entity that he would pray over. And weep over in the case of Jerusalem. When Jesus drew near to Jerusalem and he saw the city, he wept over it.

And he said, would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace. So Jesus not only thinks of individuals, but he thinks of whole cities when he brings his salvation.

When he brings the good news of Jesus. And Corinth was one of those cities. And I want to focus on Corinth, which is really just the first 17 verses of chapter 18 in our time together.

And what we see is this city that is relatively young. It's about 100 years old because it had been destroyed 200 years before because of rebellion.

There was just nothing there. It was an empty city until 100 years before Paul came. And during that time of rebuilding, it very quickly became a place of international commerce.

[4 : 41] People from all of the world came there to do business. It was on the Isthmus of Corinth. And there were two ports on either side of it. One that looked towards the west and Rome.

And the other towards the east and Asia. And it became wealthy very quickly. People there strived for social status. They wanted wealth.

They wanted power. And personal accomplishment. It was very, very competitive. It had a reputation for being a real dog-eat-dog world. You know, either you made it or you got crushed sort of thing.

It was also a place that was multicultural. Drawing people from all over. People who didn't have much of a connection to Corinth were there.

So there were a lot of disconnected people in that city. It was also religiously pluralistic. It had temples and shrines to all the Greek gods and goddesses. And also it had shrines to the newer Roman gods as well.

[5 : 41] And it also had a pretty large Jewish community. It was a city that prided itself in spirituality. And seeking after new spiritual experiences.

It sounds a little bit familiar. It sounds a little bit like Vancouver. And in fact, you should know that Corinth hosted the Isthmian Games every two years.

And they had the whole world come for these games. They were the host city permanently for them. Now, unfortunately, the thing it was also known throughout the Roman world for was its sexual immorality.

In fact, to be sexually immoral, the word used for that in the Roman Empire was to Corinthianize. To be about that. And over in that city, there was a large temple to the goddess of love, to Aphrodite. Above the city. And a thousand temple prostitutes or more walked the streets. There was a great deal of moral and spiritual darkness in that city. So, with all of its accomplishments and its power and pride and creativity and wealth, it was a place of arrogance and excess and exhaustion over work and broken families, disconnectedness as well.

[6 : 58] Well, that's the city that Paul comes to. And humanly speaking, it must have been daunting for him to come. Remember, he comes from Athens alone to the city.

He doesn't know a soul in Corinth. And he says to the Corinthians in the first letter that he writes to them, he says, You know, when I first came, I was with you in weakness and fear and trembling.

So, you see, Paul was not always bold. There was a deep sense inside of this is a big thing I'm trying to do here in Corinth. But chapter 18 shows us that the gospel is meant for the cities.

And, you know, in the Bible, cities take a prominent role. You see the Garden of Eden, and then the Garden of Eden is remade and restored in Revelation.

And it is called the New Jerusalem. And Revelation describes this massive city where people live together under the lordship of Jesus in his light.

[8 : 00] And there is this joyful, loving worship of God of this whole city. And all the activity of the city is directed towards God and towards one another according to his will.

It is a place of deep blessing and joy. And what we see in this world is that Jesus transforms people in the city as well and sees that as a way to bless the city by the gospel.

In fact, Jesus will utterly transform many people in Corinth. We see that in Paul's letters in a wonderful way. And, in fact, what happens there is that a large church is created.

Jesus brings together a large church. And there is within that city a little city, the city of God, that's meant to bless Corinth. And we're going to learn in this chapter that when you see incredible darkness in the city, like this situation, the power and the light of the gospel is made very, very clear.

In fact, it appears more powerful and more bright, brighter. And so what we're going to see is Paul coming into this. And the way that he enters the city is different from the other cities because he has to earn a living.

[9 : 21] He has to earn money in order to preach. And so he immerses himself in the commerce of the city. He gets right into city life in Corinth.

He has this professional trade, which is tent making. And he joins the tent making business run by two Christians who are Aquila and Priscilla. These people are part of the Jewish community from Rome who had been expelled because of trouble in that community.

So the government had expelled them and they ended up coming to Corinth. And we know because of their ability to travel and so forth that they were probably very successful business people.

Priscilla may have originally come from a noble Roman family because Paul, Luke uses her name before Aquila. And this couple would have helped Paul in incredible ways.

We see this in 18. They provided support to him, a job. They helped him network in that city, in the business community. And they did a great deal for the spread of the gospel in Corinth.

[10:25] So anyway, in this way, Paul gets to know the city. On Saturdays, when he had time, which was every Saturday, it tells us in verse 4 that Paul reasoned in the synagogue.

And he tried to persuade the Jews and Greeks, which means that it was an uphill struggle. And he tried to get the gospel through to them.

But he was greatly helped by Silas and Timothy in verse 5 as they arrived from Macedonia because they bring a generous offering from that church. And Paul can now give up his trade and focus all his time on God's word.

And that's what it says, that Paul was occupied with preaching all of his time. And there's an extraordinary result that happens to this focus on preaching God's word.

The first thing is that there's opposition. So if you look in verses 6 and 7, this is one of the amazing results, is that they oppose Paul and they revile him.

[11:29] They actually blaspheme against Jesus. And he shakes out his garments and says, Your blood be upon your heads. I'm innocent. From now on, I will go to the Gentiles. It's a very dramatic scene.

And it's because of the opposition of the synagogue being so intense that he has to leave. And he doesn't go far. He goes right next door. And there's a church that is set up in God's providence.

And this is going to be the center for the Christian preaching in Corinth. Now the second thing that happens, the extraordinary result, is wonderful.

Because there is belief that takes place. And I want to say that this is the great miracle in Acts. We see extraordinary healings that take place. Extraordinary signs and wonders.

But the most powerful thing that happens in the book of Acts is that belief is given to people who are far away from God. That's the greatest miracle.

[12:29] And so if you look at verse 8, you see Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed in the Lord together with his whole household. This is the leader of the next door synagogue.

It would not have gone over well. It was an unlikely person to come to faith. But the power of the gospel was such that that happened. Not only that, but if you look a little further down, many of the Corinthians hearing Paul believed and were baptized.

Now this is an amazing thing. Because these are people from the whole range of social situations in Corinth. And they are coming to a living faith in Jesus Christ. And they are being baptized.

They are literally immersing themselves in Christ. And becoming his followers forever. Because they are hearing God's word. It is a joyful statement that is very understated here by Luke.

The extraordinary miracle in Acts. Showing the power of the gospel. Now all of this causes even more opposition from the synagogue and Jewish leaders. And Paul was frightened.

[13:37] It was a time again when he did not feel bold at all. But into that situation, Jesus speaks to Paul. One night in a vision. And I want to look at what Jesus says to Paul.

It is in verse 9. One night in a vision, Jesus says to Paul, Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent. So Jesus starts out with a command.

Not to be afraid. He recognizes that there is fear in Paul's heart. As he looks at the opposition in front of him. As he looks at the resistance to the gospel that he is going to be experiencing.

There is a real sense in him as to, Do I need to leave? Like with all the other cities that was the pattern in the missionary journeys. Do I need to leave quickly? But Jesus says, No.

Speak and do not be silent. And really this is an important word for us as a church. Because Jesus is telling him that there is no way there can be the light and the hope of the gospel for people in the city.

[14:43] Unless somebody speaks that good news very, very clearly. That's the mission of our church. If there is silence about Jesus in the city, People cannot know Jesus.

They cannot be transformed in this radical, powerful way that God has for people. But how is it that Paul can just not be afraid suddenly?

Well, Jesus tells him three promises. He says, I am with you. I am with you. And I want to think about that because this is something that we are learning about all the time.

It's important for us, for Paul. It's important for the church as well. That Jesus comes into his fear and reminds him of why he is able to speak. It is simply because Jesus rose from the dead and he is with Paul.

Those words are for us today. And as we think about how we might serve Jesus in the city, The resurrection of Jesus means that God speaks clearly to us.

[15 : 46] And he tells us that Jesus is with you. That Jesus is with me. And you know, Jesus reminds us of this wonderful truth. As we read the Bible, Jesus says, That is testifying to me.

When we eat bread and drink wine in communion, Jesus is giving us this gift to tell us that we are in communion with the living Lord Jesus Who died for us and rose again for the forgiveness of our sins.

When we gather together as believers that Jesus calls the church, He is also calling us the body of Christ. He is in the midst of us. We are carrying on his ministry.

The ministry of the living Lord Jesus. So as Jesus' words go into our minds and our hearts, It pushes fear out. And it's meant to open our mouths to speak.

As Jesus was commanding Paul as well. So he's saying, I am with you. And not only that, He promises that no one will attack you or harm you.

[16 : 52] He is going to keep Paul safe. There will be attacks, but he won't be harmed. He will not have to leave the city. And here's the reason. Third part of the promise. For I have many people in this city.

And, you know, if we were able to underline this for our own mission in the city, It would be very good in verse 10 to underline that.

I have many people in this city. That's the clincher for Paul. It's the key to this chapter as well.

Because Jesus is promising to keep him safe. Because he is telling him, There are many people in Corinth that you don't know about Paul.

That will come to faith. They haven't been to church yet. They haven't been baptized. They have not come to a public acknowledgement of Jesus as their Savior. But Jesus has chosen them.

They will come to faith. And it is essential that Paul stays to give them the gospel. So that they can have that faith that will be created in them.

[17 : 55] And that's why Paul obeys. And he stays in Corinth for a year and a half. Doing one thing. Preaching the word of God among them.

In verse 11. That's what his whole focus was for that year and a half. And certainly those people that Jesus talked about to Paul came to faith because of that preaching.

And I think that that line, Jesus has many people in the city, Is key for us to understanding what God is doing in cities. In Paul's time and in our time now, Today as well.

In the most unlikely cities, Jesus has many people who will believe. That are chosen by him to belong to him. You know, You can think about it this way.

If you went down to Vancouver and saw all these people holding signs that say, We believe. You can know that there can be a double meaning for that. For those people. That they may be coming to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

[18 : 53] Because people will share the gospel with them. That's the mission of the church. God rains blessings on his church. So the church will go into the city with the gospel.

So that those he has chosen will believe. And I just want to remind you of those blessings in Corinth. But in verses 12 through 17, You see there that God had a very powerful provincial premier, Whose name was Gallio.

He had him throw out a strong legal attack by Jewish leaders against Paul. And what that meant was that Christians would have the right of freedom of religion. That Jews had as well.

Officially in the empire. And they could preach the gospel without any sort of official persecution.

And secondly, remember God gave the large house next door to the synagogue to meet him.

Not only that, but God gave Priscilla and Aquila, These wonderful Christian leaders to Paul, Who were absolutely essential in that gospel going forth. They supported him in leadership.

[19 : 58] They supported him financially. They supported him in understanding the city as well. And then finally, God gave the gift of generosity to the Macedonian church. That allowed Paul to devote all his time to the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Now I think that God has blessed St. John's with all of these things. And more as well. After all, we have the gospel completely written down in God's word.

We have this intact. It is the gift of God to us. We have faithful preaching. We have wonderful lay leaders. We have a great place to meet. We have a congregation with generous hearts.

In the giving of themselves and the giving of their financial resources. We have here the freedom to speak in Canada. And we have here many households who believe in the Lord Jesus.

These are blessings in Corinth. These are blessings that we have in St. John's as well. And there's a reason for those blessings. It is because Jesus has many people in this city.

[21 : 05] Now Corinth and Vancouver are very similar. We've said that. There is the worship of money, status. There's the worship of sexual fulfillment. And these are rampant.

But in these successful looking cities, there is a great deal underneath that is broken. So that people experience loneliness and disconnection.

People experience both in Vancouver and Corinth spiritual poverty. And actually a spiritual longing as well. There is hopeless grief in our cities.

And there is addictions of many kind. There is sexual brokenness in Corinth. Can you imagine what that sexual lifestyle that was immoral did to families, to individuals?

It was a terrible result. There's a lack of real purpose in people's lives. They're looking for what is the meaning of my life. These are things we have in common with Corinth.

[22 : 03] And we should know that many of those people are Jesus' own people, even though they do not yet believe. So that Jesus' plan for St. John's is very similar to the plan of the church in Corinth.

That we would not be silent, but that we would keep on speaking of Jesus. Because when the people in the city hear that good news, it creates belief in Jesus that heals minds.

It heals relationships. It heals our souls. It is restoration that salvation brings to people in the city.

Now I want to close by saying that there are two aspects to the part that we at St. John's play in the city.

The first thing is very active. It's looking out. We are to be those people who look for the many people that Jesus has in our city, simply by not being silent.

To actively look. Jesus' mission statement is that I came to seek and save the lost. And that is our ministry in the city as well.

[23 : 15] And the way that we find the people that Jesus has in the city is to be involved in the life of the city. And look for ways to bless that city. And all of us have avenues into life in the city.

We have our vocations. We have our families and the schools that they are part of. We have friendships and so forth. But there's many ways that you and I are easily involved in the life of the city.

And we should strive to do that. And look for ways to bless it. Look for those people that God has given to us. That we can not be silent but speak. And I think a very good Lenten discipline, not to give up but to take on, is to pray for those people that Jesus has in the city.

Who are they? Who are the people in your life that Jesus has chosen for belief? Because they are in our lives. But not only is Jesus calling us at St. John's to actively seek to bless the city and find his people, but we are also to be those who welcome Jesus' people into a new kind of city.

The city of God. That's the community of Christians that live out the gospel in their lives. It's a little city within the larger city of Vancouver. And it is a place and a community where we are open about the fact that God has restored us and is continuing that work.

[24 : 38] That humbly we are asking him and being part of that renovation work in our lives. It's a place where we celebrate sexual purity, where we celebrate faithfulness to God with our finances, and humility before God and each other.

You know, the very opposite kinds of values that are often very prominent in our city that we live in. Instead of taking away, we give of ourselves as Christ gave himself to the church.

And so instead of disconnection and rivalry that is common in the city, we commit ourselves to each other as brothers and sisters in Christ. And that's what the letters to the Corinthians often have the themes of doing.

How can you love one another better? How can you need one another? How can the community be built up that mirrors the gospel of Jesus Christ? These are the communities we are to welcome, the people that are transformed by the gospel into, that God will continue that work.

And certainly that's why hospitality is so important, and that we are faithful in our community of living out the gospel in our lives. So may God, by his grace, continue to work his power through his gospel so it produces a community like what we have been describing, like the communities that God is creating in the book of Acts.

[26 : 02] And may God also give each of us power to be faithful to Jesus and his mission to Vancouver. The gospel equips us to do that, to take our part in actually being missionaries to the city of Vancouver.

This is what God calls us to as a church. It's what he calls us to as individuals as well. May the Holy Spirit excite us, give us enthusiasm about the truth that Jesus has many people in Vancouver.

Amen. Let us kneel to pray.

Please sit or kneel to pray with me. Let us look to the God of beginnings, who will make all things beautiful in his time.

Also, he has put eternity into man's mind, yet so that they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. I perceive that whatever God does endures forever.

[27 : 30] Nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken away. God has done it. So that the fear before him, that which has already been, that which is to be, already has been, and God seeks that which has been driven away.

Lord, you indeed have many people in this city who confess that God seeks that which has been driven away.

Dearest Father God, we come to you asking to make our hearts clean and pure within us, trusting in your Holy Spirit, our comforter and interpreter of your word.

Thank you that we may know you, but even more so, that we are known by you, and that you see our hearts, and that even when our hearts condemn us, you are greater than our hearts.

Your wisdom surpasses our understanding, and Lord Jesus, when you cried out on the cross, it is finished. May we live our lives as one who's been forgiven.

[28 : 39] May we understand the immensity of the cross, the immensity of our sins, and the immensity of your forgiveness. Lord, in your mercy.

Hear our prayer. May many families come to know you in Vancouver, that our hearts want more than gold that perishes. Give us boldness, Father God, to speak your word.

Father, we realize that the enemy is never far away, yet you have placed a feast before us in the presence of our enemy, and you invite us to feast at your table.

Thank you for the life-giving word that was preached this morning by Dan. And Lord, we know that you watch over your word to perform it.

And as Jesus wept, may we also care for this world. Father, your word is indeed the greatest truth. And we pray for all the suffering that happens in this world, especially in Haiti.

[29 : 49] May your spirit be very present with the people, so that they will not lose hope. And as war rages on in Afghanistan, I pray for our soldiers. Lord, may we learn more, to live fully under your rule, to be aware of your Holy Spirit.

Father, we often wonder about the balances in life, as we in this part of the world laud the accomplishments of our athletes. And now that the world is on our doorstep, and we enjoy the games, may we, as your people, be open about our faith in word and deed.

It reminds us, Lord, that there is indeed a race set before us all, and that some of this congregation have finished it well. Lord, in your mercy.

Hear our prayer. Father, we pray for our clergy. Continue to be with David in the healing process. May your Holy Spirit strengthen both David and Bronwyn.

We pray your Holy Spirit in great measure upon Dan, Jim, Keith, also upon other ministries, either in administration or looking after the sick.

[31 : 08] We pray for Edie, for Ruth, and for all who work quietly behind the scenes. We thank you, Father God, for Terry and the choir, for their faithfulness.

And Father, as we are reminded in these sermons that your word indeed goes throughout the whole of the world, we pray for our missionaries, for Susan and Heather, for Joss and Jess.

And as they bring your gospel to the ends of the earth, and we ourselves find ourselves on a journey of faith, may we find, you find us occupied until you come.
We are so aware that the highway to Zion takes a detour via Calvary. And it is in the crucible of your love that we are shaped and God-fashioned.
You have wrapped us in the finished work of Christ. Thank you, Father God. Blessed be your most holy name. Lord, in your mercy. Hear our prayer. Let there be a moment of silence as we pray for our suffering world and for our loved ones who are ill or without hope.
[32 : 19] We pray, Father, for those who will undergo surgery this week.
And we pray that your hand will guide the surgeon. And as we name them, we pray for Ken, Harold, Rowena, Rosemary, Lori, and Kathy.
O Lord, we have heard the report of you. And your work, O Lord, do we fear. In the midst of the years, revive it.
In the midst of the years, make it known. In your wrath, remember mercy. Even though we stand with empty hands, Lord, you are such a tender mercy.
Weave in us strands of hope and even some carefree joy. Blessed be your most holy name. Amen.