

God has Many People

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning again. St. Paul's, it's great to connect in with you. It was about 28 years ago or so. It was really not long after I became a Christian, I ran into a former work colleague in a supermarket. And he asked me straight away if it was true, the rumor that he'd heard that in his words, I had found religion and was now involved in working in a church.

When I said to him that, yes, it was true that I'd become a Christian before I said anything else, he very sharply and very quickly replied. He said, mate, keep it to yourself. He says, if you ever speak to me about it, he said, we are finished. Just like that. So nearly 30 years later, and it feels like that sentiment that I experienced in the supermarket on that day is running right through our society. If you're a Christian, the pressure is to be quiet. It's a subtle pressure, but sometimes it's a little more than subtle. I've read of Christian teachers choosing not to wear crosses to work because they know that their credibility will be lost if they are known to be Christian. Only a couple of years ago, the graduate intake at a major bank in Sydney were told on their first day that this company does not do religion.

Talk of faith was not welcome and in fact would be considered a breach of corporate policy. And so if you want to advance in this bank, you must be quiet.

There are plenty of other examples. Many Christians today are afraid to speak about the good news of Jesus Christ in this city. Now it might come as a surprise to us as we open the book of Acts this morning that the devout, single-minded, bold Apostle Paul also battled fear in mission and speaking about Jesus. This is what Paul talks about. This is what he has written about. He's a rival to the city of Corinth, which was just read out to us by Noll in 1 Corinthians chapter 2.

I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling. So what has got Paul so fearful?

[2 : 3 9] And how was that fear overcome? That's our question today. Now we're in the second half of the New Testament book of Acts and so far we've seen a whole range of people in a whole heap of different places, range of different people, ethnic, economic, social backgrounds have come and put their faith in Jesus Christ. There is no Christian type. Jesus is for everyone and everyone needs Jesus. Now some of the places that the Apostle Paul has visited have been fairly small, insignificant kind of rural villages and towns, but that could not be said of the city of Corinth. And so open your Bibles, Acts 18 is where we're up to the St. Paul's app also has a bit of an outline if you want to follow me through for today. First of all, I want to introduce us to the city of Corinth, the cosmopolitan Corinth.

The first thing that we need to know about this city is it's a city that was on the up and up where Athens was the intellectual center of the ancient world. Corinth was the commercial center.

The population of Athens that Paul has just visited, you know, the chapter before was around about 10,000 people at Paul's time. Corinth, on the other hand, was three quarters of a million people.

Corinth was strategically placed at the crossroads of trade routes. Corinth was unusual in that where it geographically sat on the end of a peninsula meant that in fact it boasted two shipping ports.

Trade would travel north and south from Corinth via land and east and west via the sea. Its markets were stocked with goods, the finest goods from all over the world. It's literally the world converged on Corinth. People from all over the Roman world had in fact moved into Corinth to take up the cosmopolitan lifestyle. And so the apostle Paul in coming to Corinth must have seen the strategic importance of Corinth. If trade could radiate from and to Corinth, so could the good news of Jesus Christ. The second thing we need to know about Corinth is that Corinth was world famous for its immorality. Behind the city of Corinth rose the mountain Acro-Corinth. On the flat summit stood the temple of

[5 : 24] Aphrodite, the goddess of Aphrodite, the goddess of love. And serving Aphrodite at the temple was 1,000 female slaves who roamed the streets as prostitutes for Aphrodite, the streets of Corinth. And Corinth was famous for its immorality. In fact, so much so, particularly their sexual promiscuity, that a name was given for sexual promiscuity in the ancient world and it was called to Corinthianize. Corinth was a large, upwardly mobile, progressive, confident, proud, inclusive, pleasure-seeking, wealthy, immoral city.

And so will the good news of Jesus Christ that is at impact in villages and towns and different people, will it have impact in a city like Corinth?

And so we now come to Paul's mission in Corinth and along comes Paul. Why did the courageous, bold, poor, come to Corinth in his own words, weakness, fear and trembling?

Now partly, he must have felt at least a little dejected as he walked the 80 kilometers from Athens to Corinth. You know, since he has arrived in Europe, he has suffered a terrible beating in Philippi, civil rejection in Thessalonica and Berea and indifference and apathy in Athens. And the next thing he has is Corinth.

The size, the pride, the immorality of this city must have been intimidating to the tired, bruised Paul. He knew his message would come into direct conflict with the whole culture of this city.

[7 : 30] And he tells us, as we read in 1 Corinthians chapter 2, I resolved to know nothing while the world was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

That's his message. And he knew that message was going to come in total conflict with the city of Corinth. Now for Christians tuning into us right now, that message there, Christ and him crucified, means that Jesus Christ, the eternal son of God, died on a cross as a once for all substitute in our place so that we would not have to suffer eternal death, but would enjoy the abundant and eternal life that Jesus purchased for us.

That is, Jesus swapped his life for our death so that we might have his life. Now the problem with that view of the cross is that it leaves out one huge fact.

I mean, it's all good, it's just that it leaves out one huge fact. One aspect that is so crucial.

And Jesus stated it in Luke chapter 9 verse 23. If anyone would come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.

[9 : 05] You see, when Christ died on the cross for sinners, he not only stood in my place doing what I could never do, and that is forgive my own sin against God, but he also showed me what I must do in order to save my life.

I take up my cross and I join him on the Calvary road of death to self. Christ died to save us from God's judgment forever, but not to save us from the cross.

He died so that we could be glorified, not to keep us from being crucified. For the Christian, the cross of Christ is not merely a past place of substitution for our sin and the justice of God being satisfied.

It is certainly that. But it is also the present place of daily execution. In other words, never let the cross of Christ lose its crucifying power in your life.

Never let the cross slip into the past as though Jesus died for sinners so that we could live for pleasure.

[10 : 34] Oh, make no mistake, friends. The pleasures are coming. Jesus has promised them. And some, if you're a Christian, some are already here and you know they're already here. Things like forgiveness and acceptance and a measure of holiness and healing.

And oh my goodness, right now, hope, hope for life forever is just so, so pleasurable. The Christian has life and hope.

But just like Jesus endured the cross for the joy that was set before him, so it is with us in this age according to the book of Hebrews. Most of the joy that we long for as Christians is just over the horizon and Jesus' guarantee that it will come.

And so, as Hebrews says to us in chapter 13, verses 13 and 14, The great tragedy of much of contemporary Christian thought is that the cross of Christ is safely relegated to a distant past.

Practically what that means, for it's way too many, particularly in the Western world, is that Jesus was soaked in blood so that I can soak in a jacuzzi.

[12 : 05] That is not the Christian faith. Jesus Christ was restrained on a cross so that we might be truly free, liberated from sin, set free from slavery to self.

The message of Christ and him crucified means that if you would save your life, you must lose it. And if you would follow Jesus, you must take up your cross daily.

And that is Paul's message to Corinth. In the same way, it's our message to Sydney. It was Corinth, like Sydney, a self-confident, proud city.

It was full of self-made people. And the message of Jesus Christ and him crucified undermines all human pride. Corinth was a city of self-indulgence, a pleasure-seeking city.

And the message of Christ crucified would warn them that the sexually immoral will not inherit the kingdom of God. The good news calls them to repent and to live a life of holiness.

[13 : 19] It calls them to die to self. In other words, the good news that Paul preached at Corinth called for both self-humbling and self-denial.

And so Paul must have wondered, of all the places in the ancient world, would Corinth receive it?

And the early signs is yes. Yes, they did. Crispus, the synagogue ruler, became a Christian. That's what we know first of up. But the apostle Paul fell prey to fear and discouragement.

And I think verse 6 is the trigger point where this discouragement really sets in for Paul. He tells the Jews in verse 6 that the blood is on their own heads for rejecting Jesus.

And then he takes the newly converted synagogue leader next door to start a church amongst the Gentiles. He must have known this is the moment of trouble.

[14 : 26] This is the moment where it's about to go bad. He's rejected the temple. He's moving the synagogue leader next door to a church. He's now reaching this immoral, proud, pagan, Gentile city.

This is when it's going to go bad. His previous experience tells him this is the moment that the riots start. This is when the crowds form.

This is when he gets flogged. This is when he gets imprisoned. This is when he gets thrown out of town. This is the moment. And so what Paul does in my mind here in this moment is he borrows worries.

He's worrying about troubles that he's yet to face. Can you experience? Can you experience? You know that? What that feels like?

You do that in day by day life? We often worry about a thousand tribulations that we never go through. Maybe Paul thinks that whatever happens next, it will be bad news for him.

[15 : 41] And so God ministers to him in this moment. It's a vision bearing words of just refreshment for this apostle. God loves and cares for his children. So have a look at verse 9.

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.

1 John 4 verse 18 teaches us there is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear. And the simple words, not to be afraid, must have just filled Paul's heart here with God's love.

God's word tells us again and again and again, do not be afraid. Do not fear. To stop worrying about tomorrow. To stop borrowing trouble.

In Jesus, all fear has been cast out. In Jesus, we are God's much-loved children. And he has tomorrow in his hands. And Paul is told to speak.

[16 : 57] His fear made him afraid to speak. Silence for the apostle. Paul in this moment would have imprisoned his fear. But boldness for the gospel would cause him to overcome it.

And he's also promised here in this moment divine presence and protection. God tells him, I am with you. And no one is going to attack and harm you.

It's the promise of the resurrected, death-defeating, sin-destroying, all-conquering Lord Jesus Christ. As he sends his disciples into the world on the mission that we are still partaking in 2,000 years later, he said to us, I am with you.

I am with you. I am with you. No harm would come to Paul in Corinth. That wasn't true for Paul in the previous months.

And it won't be true for him in the future. But it was true right there in that moment. But those words also meant for the apostle Paul that nothing would ultimately and totally harm Paul and bring him down.

[18 : 06] And that, my friends, is the promise for every Christian. God's protection for us does not mean that in some way we'll be free from difficulties. But God will never allow us to face more than what we can bear.

Nothing can harm the freedom, the eternal life, the hope, and the joy we have in Jesus. Not even a city-wide lockdown.

Nothing will hinder the advance of God's work in this world. Even a city-wide lockdown. Jesus keeps his promise to protect Paul in Corinth.

And the amazing irony in this moment is that the chief means of that protection is, in fact, Roman law and Galileo.

Unexpectedly, the ruling authorities were on Paul's side. And his right to speak about Jesus. The opposition, this time, backfired.

[19 : 21] And the crowd miraculously turns on the synagogue leader. And commentators are of the view that the crowd here that turned on the synagogue leader were not the Jews who were against Paul, but the Gentiles of the city turned on the synagogue leader for trying to stir up trouble.

It was a miraculous turnaround. The apostle Paul was worrying about things that he didn't need to worry about.

And the surprising events here means that Paul was free to bring the word of God in Corinth for the next 18 months. And he did.

There were many who belonged to Jesus in Corinth was God's promise to Paul. As intimidating as this city was, compared to almighty God and his purposes, it was no more than a little Lego town.

So what does this mean for us and our mission to Chatswood and beyond? There are many who belong to Jesus in this city too.

[20 : 38] We know God's mission is for all people from every tribe, language, nation, and culture to find life in Jesus Christ, to find hope in Jesus Christ.

That's what God has been doing for 2,000 years. Despite persecutions, hardships, political oppression, lockdowns, God is still at work.

And even though the city and the society that we find ourselves here in Sydney is intimidating to the Christian, there are still many who belong to Jesus in this place.

There are those who love this city, and there are those who are just tired of the culture of it. They're feeling enslaved by it too.

There are plenty in this city filled with guilt and shame from the pleasure-seeking life, realizing that it has come up empty.

[21 : 35] It is ultimately not satisfying. It's an addiction, and all addictions enslave you. They rule you. You don't rule them.

And maybe that's you right now listening to this. You've somehow turned into this, and you're hearing this. And my word to you is come to Jesus.

Come to Jesus now and find freedom from slavery to sin. Jesus was constrained to a cross so that you might be set free.

His offer to you is freedom. And his offer is free. The message of Jesus Christ crucified means that you are more sinful, and you are more wicked and proud than you ever imagined, and yet you are more loved and forgiven and affirmed and free than you could ever imagine possible.

For those who are Christian, however, listening to this, it is so important that you not be intimidated by the city and its culture.

[22 : 48] God is bigger and more powerful. Those who are his in this city are his. The apostle Peter was told, earlier in the book of Acts, was told not to speak about Jesus by the religious authorities of his day in Acts chapter 4.

And his reply was this, salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to humanity by which they must be saved.

And as Ash has reminded us earlier in this service, the same Peter tells us in 1 Peter chapter 3 verse 15, always be prepared to give an answer to anyone and everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.

And so if you're a Christian listening to this, and if you're one of those people who's gone quiet about Jesus, I wonder if the reason you aren't freer and more natural in testifying to the reality of the hope that you have in Jesus, is mostly because you don't feel hopeful.

I wonder if that's it. I think we don't talk about Jesus when our hearts are not full of hope in the promises of Christ.

[24 : 10] If Jesus is our treasure and our hearts devotion, then I think there's a delight to tell someone why we are so hopeful. And particularly in days of difficulty, why we still are so full of hope.

I fear that too many church people cannot make a case for the hope that's within them because they don't actually feel any hope brimming up within their hearts.

And so the way you get ready to make a case for the hope that is in you is to get hopeful.

Apply yourself to settling the questions of your own heart. We must find for ourselves reason enough to get over the fear of people and to live a lively hope.

Search out the promises of Christ and meditate on his character and his work for the sake of your salvation and for the banishment of your fear and for the kindling of your hope.

[25 : 16] The same loving, caring ministry that God offered the apostle Paul, he offers directly to you as well. The same ministry that came to Paul is exactly the same ministry that can come to you.

He spoke to Paul, ministered to Paul, and he speaks to you and wants to minister to you. In these troubled times, God wants to give you hope.

He wants his promises to be real to you as well and clear to you as it was for Paul. Day after day, therefore, we must be in the Bible.

Not to anxiously amass arguments for every possible rebuttal someone might have in our secular age, but because you and I are so desperately needy, desperately needy, our own hope waxes and wanes day in and day out.

We have fears that need to be overcome by the promises of God. We have doubts that need to be answered. The fight of faith is waged in the word of God and prayer.

[26 : 34] And so let me add to Nick's challenge. Pick it up. Do it. Four or more a week.

And when we emerge from that encounter with God, with a renewed and lively hope in his promises, we will be ready to make a case for our hope.

The Bible reveals God's intimate knowledge of his people, even to the point where he knows the number of hairs on each head, which in my case, the figure changes rapidly.

Fear is incompatible with faith. Fear simply means that we must grow our confidence in God. Fear assumes God is distant, unacquainted with the trials of his people.

And that is not the God of the Bible. He knows everything we face today and tomorrow and next year. But he promises us, never will I leave you, never will I forsake you.

[27 : 48] Turkey is word Eastern.

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