

## **The Promises of Presence and Purpose** (Acts 18:1-17)

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Acts 18 begins with what is by now a very familiar pattern:

- The Apostle Paul arrives in a new city.
- He establishes a ministry team and teaches in a synagogue with the hope of persuading the Jewish people that Jesus is the Messiah.
- Later (often after being rejected by the Jews), he moves on to sharing the same message with any Gentiles who would listen.

Paul's persistence in this pattern and his dedication to his calling has inspired Christians for thousands of years. We marvel at his endurance. We are humbled by his devotion to sharing the Gospel. We often think about Paul as the very picture of Christian excellence. Here is someone who gave every bit of himself to Jesus, who devoted his entire life, his every moment, his mind, body, and soul, unwaveringly, to the cause of Christ. Many who love talking with others about Jesus, or who feel called to missions, or who can't get enough of theology and Bible study have often found in Paul a kindred spirit and mentor. And he is indeed a fantastic example to follow in all of these ways.

However, this morning, as we look at Acts 18:1-17, we're given a chance to see a very different sort of Apostle Paul. In this passage Paul is tired, weary, and close to breaking down and burning out.

Today Paul's story will connect with anyone who has ever experienced a crisis in their confidence when it comes to what we think Jesus has called us to do. Today is for those who struggle with fear in the midst of their faith. For those who have tried and tried and tried again to be what they think Jesus wants them to be, but in doing so have been knocked down so many times they aren't sure they want to go on with it anymore.

Today is for those who need to hear, just as the Apostle needed to hear, ***the promise that Jesus is with you and that he has a purpose for you.*** Holding as tightly as we can to these truths we can, just like Paul, keep moving forward in faith.

As we read earlier, Paul arrives in the city of Corinth and makes some new friends named Aquila and Priscilla. This married couple had recently been driven out of Rome under the edict of Emperor Claudius that all Jews (and Jewish Christians) had to leave. Paul partners up with Aquila and Priscilla in their tent making business, while also visiting the local synagogue in the hope of persuading the Jews and Greek God-fearers there to follow Jesus. Later, Paul's fellow missionary and ministry partners Silas and Timothy arrive (likely with funds from previously planted church communities), and Paul switches to full-time ministry.

This is where we see the classic Paul, going all-in on evangelism...and stirring up some trouble in the process.

*5 When Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia, Paul devoted himself exclusively to preaching, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Messiah. 6 But when they opposed Paul and became abusive, he shook out his*

*clothes in protest and said to them, “Your blood be on your own heads! I am innocent of it. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.”*

Acts 18 (NIV)

This is not the first time Paul has decided to stop preaching to Jews in favor of ministering instead to Gentiles. Back in Acts 13 we find a very similar scene. Paul is preaching in a synagogue and a hostile Jewish crowd is again “heaping abuse” on Paul. His response, however, is far more gentle and measured. In Acts 13 he simply says, *“We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles.”* (v46)

That’s a very different tone than *“Your blood be on your own hands!”* It makes me wonder if at this point Paul's life of ministry – and the rejection, abuse, and persecution he experienced because of it – is wearing him down.

Paul *“shook out his clothes in protest”*, meaning that he is so offended by the synagogue’s actions that he wants to leave everything about it behind – from the people all the way down to the dirt.

When he cries out, *“Your blood be on your own head! I am innocent of it”*, Paul is actually quoting the prophet Ezekiel and basically saying: “I tried to help, you rejected it, your fate is your own fault and not my own. I’m done with you.”

Paul walks out irritated and angry. And then, strangely enough, he goes right next door into the house of a God-fearing Gentile, where he finds a much more open-minded audience and is able to preach with great success.

*7 Then Paul left the synagogue and went next door to the house of Titius Justus, a worshiper of God. 8 Crispus, the synagogue leader, and his entire household believed in the Lord; and many of the Corinthians who heard Paul believed and were baptized.*

Acts 18 (NIV)

This all seems like very typical Paul. Bold, brave, and unrelenting in his commitment to the Gospel. His preaching in the house of Titius Justus brought “many” to faith in Christ, including Crispus, who had been the leader of the synagogue. As we look over Paul’s ministry in Acts 9-17, this is all very business-as-usual.

Which is why v9-10 are so surprising:

*9 One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: “Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. 10 For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city.”*

Acts 18 (NIV)

“Afraid” isn’t the word we associate with the Apostle Paul very often. So far we’ve seen him persevere after being mocked, beaten, and pelted with stones until he was very near death. He debated theology with his Jewish brothers and sisters and clashed with Gentile philosophers. A few weeks ago we read how he and Silas remained

in their collapsed prison cell after an earthquake so they could witness to their guard and bring him and his entire household to faith in Christ. Fear isn't the feeling we think of when we think of Paul.

So why does the Lord come to Paul in a vision in the middle of the night to comfort and encourage him? ***What is Paul afraid of, and why is he afraid of it?***

The answer to the first question is right there in v9, but it's so shocking, so out of character, that I think sometimes we overlook it: ***Paul is afraid of continuing his ministry. He is afraid of speaking up anymore. He is afraid of preaching the Gospel.***

His fear was not obvious or evident as he went about his work during the day. But human beings tend to hide their fears. We don't want others to know when we are weak. We don't want anyone to see our vulnerability, to discover how close we are to our breaking point.

But you can't hide your fears from the Lord. And what's more...you don't need to. Jesus doesn't arrive in the middle of the night to rebuke Paul or shame him for his feelings of fear. "*Don't be afraid*" is an invitation to rely on Jesus and draw near the One whose perfect love for you casts out fear. We'll come back to this point in a bit, but I do want to make sure we all, as we look at v9, see the tenderness of Christ as he comforts Paul.

This is the voice of an understanding friend.

This is the care of a compassionate creator.

This is who Jesus was to Paul, and it is who Jesus is to us, too.

So, Paul is afraid of continuing to speak, of preaching and teaching the Gospel. But why? Why is he afraid? What is it about his continuing his ministry that has caused him to need this visit from the Lord in the middle of the night?

***Paul's fear was caused by the persistent hostility and relational hardships that he had experienced ever since committing his life to sharing the Gospel.***

Telling others what was true about Jesus may have allowed Paul to be a part of new people coming to faith in Christ and the planting churches all over the Roman Empire. But it also led to him being frequently arrested, beaten, forced out of town, and rarely allowed him the comfort of making any place a "home" for very long.

In Acts 16, Paul was guided by the Holy Spirit and a supernatural vision to enter Macedonia and share the Gospel in that region. He must have been so excited as he sailed from Troas to Samothrace and Phillipi, knowing without a doubt that his journey had been commissioned by God. God literally TOLD him where to go. What amazing things he must have been sure were waiting for him!

I wonder how fast that excitement turned to frustration, confusion, and fear as he was repeatedly threatened with death, treated like an enemy, and plagued by persistent hostility. Day after day of such dangers wore Paul down. It stirred up doubt and confusion in his heart. And I think it left him lying awake at night in the city of Corinth, anxiously wondering "*What am I doing here? Is this really how sharing the Gospel is supposed to be? Am I even*

*safe tonight? Or are there people, right now, planning to pound on the door and drag me out of my bed once again?"*

The persistent hostility of a world set against the will of God and the Gospel of Jesus Christ was getting to Paul, just as it gets to us all today. It was breaking him down. It was causing fear to rule in his heart. Paul himself confesses this in his letter to the Corinthians that he sent to them some time after he'd left:

*1 When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. 2 For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. 3 I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling.*

1 Corinthians 2

When Paul walked from the synagogue to the house of Titius Justus next door, he did so on an empty tank. He was weak, he was fearful, and he was trembling. The hostility of the world had gotten to him and he was close to his breaking point.

So if you have ever been worn out by the world and struggled with fear when faced with sharing the Gospel...guess what? You and the Apostle Paul have something in common. Such struggles are not the mark of a bad, faithless Christian. They are sometimes just what happens when you proclaim what is true.

A second factor in Paul's being afraid was **relational hardship** he had suffered ever since becoming a Christian and sharing the Gospel.

Paul's decision to follow Jesus came at great relational cost. His identity, community, and family were all directly tied to his being a Hebrew and a member of the nation of Israel.

Paul's faith in Christ changed all of that. His people, his Jewish brothers and sisters, who he cared about the most in all the world...many of them became alienated and even hostile in light of his new life as a follower of Jesus the Messiah. In city after city, synagogue after synagogue, Paul's Gospel message was rejected, and Paul himself was considered an enemy.

In Acts 18, the weight of all that rejection and the sorrow of all those broken relationships is finally getting to Paul. And I think it is causing him to wonder, *"Is speaking up really worth all this pain?"*

I am sure many of you listening today can sympathize with Paul in these sorts of fears. You know that there is a chance if you obey Christ and share the Gospel you will be met with hostility from the world and hardships within the relationships that matter the most to you.

Some of you have no doubt experienced these wounds yourself. You've tried your hand at evangelism, and in turn you were met with anger and sharp words. You've shared your faith, and been accused of being narrow minded or even hateful. Perhaps after you decided to follow Jesus you went and told your family and friends, only to be shocked the news tore a painful relational refit between you and them. The ones you love the most keep their distance, and that distance hurts, a lot.

Or, maybe you are not yet a believer in Jesus and this is the very reason why: you don't want to experience what Paul has gone through. You're not sure the Gospel is really worth the possibility of your friends turning away from you and the world hating what you think is true.

To all who sit up in the middle of the night, kept awake by the anxiety and worries and frightening possibilities of what it might mean to be a Christian who shares Christ...I pray the promises of v9-10 are a light and an encouragement for you, just as they were for Paul:

*9 One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: "Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. 10 For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city."*

Acts 18 (NIV)

*"Don't be afraid"* is not a command telling Paul to just get over his fears and get on with his work. Instead, *"don't be afraid"* is an invitation to trust the two promises Jesus offers to Paul as comfort and courage: ***"I am with you", and "I have a purpose for you."***

"I am with you" – The promise of the presence of Jesus is no small thing. Indeed, our close communion with Christ is EVERYTHING. All our hope, all our strength, all our needs are sustained and satisfied in the knowledge of being close to Jesus. Of being one with Jesus. Of abiding with our Lord and Savior.

For Paul, I'm sure this promise was powerful because it gave him the assurance that no matter what he had suffered or would suffer, he was never alone in that suffering. No matter how many people turned their love for him into hate because of what he believed, he was never going to be wholly unloved. Whether preaching before hundreds or scratching out a letter to a church while chained in prison, Paul could always return to this one promise: "I am not alone. Jesus is with me."

This same promise is offered to all who follow Christ. You are not alone. Jesus is with you, too.

In every place, every conversation, every relationship, every moment, every celebration, and every struggle, every joy, and every heartache: **Jesus is with you. He promises His presence. Trust that promise.**

In the second half of v10, Jesus reminds Paul that all of his sacrifices are part of something bigger than himself. Jesus says, *"I have many people in this city"* – the Kingdom of God was present and growing in Corinth. There was work to be done, and that work was ***Paul's God-given purpose***. The Gospel needed to be preached. Jesus was telling Paul that there were people waiting for someone to come tell them about Christ crucified and resurrected. They were waiting, in fact, for Paul!

At this time, that purpose came with the promise of a reprieve from the hostility and abuse he'd experienced so far. This peace would not last (Paul would go on to be beaten again, arrested again, mocked again, and according to church tradition eventually beheaded). But in this moment Jesus gave Paul the gifts of peace and rest while he remembered and took hold of his purpose: to share the Gospel and make disciples of Jesus who love God, one another, and their neighbors.

Everyone here shares this same purpose. We may never travel the world as evangelists. We may never stand before thousands and preach. But I believe God has many people in this city, in Manhattan, in our neighborhoods, and within all our relationships. ***We too just share the Gospel in the hope of making disciples of Jesus who love God, one another, and their neighbors.*** It's a mission simply stated but profoundly life changing. You have a God-given purpose, here, right now, this very day, in this very place. What will you do with that knowledge? How will you take up your purpose?

***How might your life be different this week if every day, every morning, you began by reminding yourself that Jesus is with you and that Jesus has a purpose for you?***

- Jesus is with you – how might embracing this truth change your attitude about yourself and towards others?
- Jesus has a purpose for you – how might embracing this truth change your priorities, impact the way you spend your time, or encourage you when you wonder if what you do really matters?

Jesus is with you. Jesus has a purpose for you. How will these truths, these gifts from God, transform who you are and what you choose to do this week?

What did Paul do with the knowledge of Jesus' promises? He stuck around Corinth and kept at his calling. 18:11-17 tells us that he spent a year and half in the city, teaching and preaching and building the church. Eventually trouble does come his way again. The Jewish authorities drag him before the Roman proconsul Gallio, accusing him of "*persuading the people to worship God in ways contrary to the law*" (v13).

There is so much going on in these final verses that we won't have time to look at today, but I want to point out one interesting thing. Jesus had promised Paul his presence and assured Paul of his purpose. And in v14, I think we get a glimpse of those promises at work.

*14 Just as Paul was about to speak, Gallio 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. 15 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." 16 So he drove them off.*

Acts 18

Just as Paul was about to speak, the Roman official inexplicably cuts him off and dismisses the entire case. Paul does not have to defend himself. Paul does not have to explain himself. Paul does not have to endure persecution or pack up and flee the city. Just as Jesus had promised, no harm came to him. And I think it is because in this moment Jesus is with him, just as he promised he would be.

Jesus is with you. Jesus has a purpose for you. I hope and pray you are encouraged by these truths this week, and that you allow them to shape who you are, what you do, and to drive back your own fears.