

In our passage last time we learned of Paul's missionary efforts in Athens. His ministry there was a challenge, because many of the people thought that they already knew everything, and Paul's presentation of the gospel was out of step with their philosophy. While a small handful of people responded to the gospel in faith, the text suggests that there was not a large Christian presence in Athens when Paul left town.

In tonight's passage we read of the furthestmost outreach, of the second missionary journey, before Paul, and his companions, made their way back to Antioch. Our missionaries experienced greater success when they focused their efforts in the city of Corinth, but their efforts were met with familiar challenges. In the end, Paul spent a great deal of time in Corinth, and later wrote two of his longest letters to the church in that city, which continued to struggle with worldliness among the members of their congregation. Let us read together, Acts 18:1-17.

The ancient city of Corinth was a large prosperous city located in modern day Greece. The people were mostly pagan, and two Greek gods in particular influenced the life of its people. Within the city were two temples, one to Apollo, and the other to Aphrodite.

Apollo was said to be the son of Zeus. To the Greeks, he was the god of music, truth, poetry, and had the power over the use of medicine, and healing. Aphrodite was said to be the goddess of love, and prostitution. This was a city heavily under the influence of the Epicurean philosophers, and its people sought worldly and sensual pleasure. Sexual immorality was a way of life in Corinth, and the emphasis on worldliness made for a difficult challenge in sharing the gospel.

In 1 Corinthians 2:1-5, we learn that Paul arrived in Corinth in fear and trembling. He was alone in a foreign city. He faced much persecution and suffered greatly in the other cities he visited. He was tired, uncertain, and afraid of what might happen to him in Corinth. This was on top of his concerns about the open sexual immorality in the city and, and how to deal with it.

He was probably discouraged because of the meager results of his efforts in Athens. What would people think of him when he shared the gospel in Corinth, and he tried to introduce them to God's moral standards? Would the Jews once again persecute him? Was his life in danger?

I think that it is important for us to try to empathize with Paul, and get into his mindset when he first arrived in Corinth. Christians sometimes glamorize Paul's success in ministry, without fully appreciating his personal struggles. We too have struggles in our hearts and minds as we seek to share the gospel with people, and shine the light of Christ in this dark world. This is a part of the spiritual struggle that we all have to endure. But if we are faithful to the end, God gets the glory, and he uses us to advance his kingdom.

Fortunately, Paul did not have to go through his struggles alone. Shortly after arriving at Corinth, he made friends with a Jew named Aquila, and his wife, Priscilla. They were a husband and wife team that worked at their family business of tent making. Paul also possessed the skills necessary for tent making and became partners with them in their enterprise. Not only did this give Paul a means of supporting himself, he developed a close bond with the couple, and God encouraged him by placing caring people in his life.

The bible does not say whether or not they were believers when Paul first met them, but if not, they certainly became believers, and were themselves instrumental in the spread of the gospel, and in encouraging the churches. Paul highly esteems them in several of his letters, and they became life-long friends.

It is much harder for people today to live the life of faith, to share the gospel, and to be the light of Christ in this dark world, if we have to face the associated challenges alone. Aquila and Priscilla had a strong bond in marriage that helped them in every area of their life, just as a strong, godly, marriage is a blessing to both the husband and wife today. Beyond the marriage relationship we find encouragement to face challenges when we have strong bonds with like-minded friends. This is one of the key purposes of the New Testament Church. We receive direction, strength, and encouragement through our relationships with brothers and sisters in Christ.

Not only did Aquila and Priscilla encourage Paul, Paul encouraged them. In 52 AD, the Roman Emperor Claudius expelled all Jews from the city of Rome, because the Jews in the city persecuted the Christians, and in so doing caused great civil unrest. Remember, that at this point, the Romans viewed Christians as a sect of the Jews, making no distinction between the two. The married couple was familiar with religious persecution. They fled Rome with their lives, so we understand that they had a lot in common with Paul.

Once Paul established himself in Corinth, as was his practice elsewhere, he spent every Sabbath, sharing the gospel in the local synagogue. As in other cities, he had mixed results. For the most part, the Jews rejected Paul, and the gospel, but some of them responded in faith.

During this time Silas and Timothy rejoined Paul in Corinth. They were a great help to Paul because he needed, and appreciated, their encouragement, and companionship. We learn, from 1 Thessalonians 3:6-10, that Paul was encouraged by Timothy's report of the steadfastness, and spiritual growth, of the people in the church at Thessalonica. Additionally the Philippian church sent financial support to make it possible for Paul to engage full time in ministry.

At this point I want to say thank you to the church family for taking care of your pastors financially. During my tenure in seminary, and for a year after graduation, I was a bi-vocational pastor. But, for the last 17 years you have generously provided for my family and me. Your financial support allows all of the pastors to devote our attention to the work of the gospel, and the edification of the church.

As in the other cities he visited, Paul eventually became frustrated with the Jews as they rejected the gospel, and opposed Paul, week after week. He shook out his clothing in a gesture of defiance, and declared that from now on, he would reach out to the pagan gentiles, and the Jews would face the judgment they deserved for rejecting Jesus.

Paul then left the synagogue, but he didn't leave alone. The synagogue ruler gave his life to the Lord, as did a number of others. One of them, a man named Titus Justus, had property next door to the synagogue, where they set up a Christian church. Think about that for a minute. How would you feel if a group of people from our church got mad, and left the church, only to open another church right next door to ours, where they taught doctrines contrary to ours? How would you feel if a group of Mormons, or Jehovah's Witness, bought the property next to ours, and built a church?

Add to this the propensity already displayed by the Jews towards violence against Paul, and you can see how these events set up a dangerous situation. Paul must have been terrified at the thought of what could happen. Nobody likes to suffer, and Paul had already suffered greatly in other cities at the hands of the Jews.

Fear is the devil's tool to try to cripple our witness. Paul here feared for his life. We do not know that kind of fear in our daily lives, yet Christians today cower under the slightest oppression. We fear what others might think. We fear rejection. We fear we might make someone uncomfortable, which in reality means we ourselves fear that we will be uncomfortable,

when we talk about the Lord. More, and more, people fear the resistance of government, or fear they will be deemed politically incorrect, but Jesus said, fear not, for I am with you always.

We know the Apostle Paul struggled in fear over his situation, because God sent him a vision. In that vision, the Lord told Paul not to be afraid. Don't be silent, go on speaking. Share the gospel with the people. Nobody's going to hurt you, or attack you because I am with you. God said the He had a plan, and a purpose, for the people in that city, and Paul was to play an important part in God's plan.

Through these verses of scripture, the preaching of God's word, and the ministry of the Holy Spirit, the Lord cries out to us tonight. Don't be afraid to share the good news. Don't be afraid to take your stand. Don't be afraid to shine the light of Christ into the darkness. Go on declaring the truth. Nobody is going hurt you so long as the Lord has people to reach, and we are called according to His purpose. This was a good word of encouragement to Paul, when he was nearly crippled with fear. It is a good word for us today, as we face the challenges that lie ahead.

When we get a direct word from God, it changes everything, if we respond in faith, and obedience. When God told me to stop drinking, I was afraid I could not, but He gave me victory. When God called me to the ministry, and told me to go to New Orleans to prepare myself, I was afraid, but he blessed me, and gave new meaning and purpose to my life. When God told me He was sending me back to Hickory Hammock, and I talked with Brother Carl, and he said it was impossible at that time, I continued in my ministry, and worked a secular job. In God's timing, everything happened, just as He said. Over and over, in God's word, and through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, God is calling all of us to be His witnesses. He says, "Don't be afraid. Speak with boldness. I am with you."

The promises of God sustain us, and help us to overcome our fear. But, notice that His word does not promise that we will not be opposed. Paul stayed in Corinth for a year and a half, which was second only to his stay in Ephesus. The Jews continued to oppose Paul; the only difference was that God took away the fear. When we have victory over fear, we have boldness to stand against opposition.

As in other cities, the Jews, in an effort to discredit Paul, brought accusations against him to the authorities. Their charge was that Paul was breaking the law by sharing his faith. More and more, in our culture, people shape their interpretation of the law to oppose the gospel of Christ: no more bibles in schools, no more ten commandments in public places, no more public praying in Jesus' name, no more rights for an unborn child, no more protection of our children against sexual godlessness in the public arena. It seems that every principle of God's word is being called into question, and every person who shares the gospel, or takes a stand on biblical principles, will be opposed.

Under Roman law, Paul could not proselytize Roman citizens, but the proconsul ruled that the Jewish objection to Paul's teaching was a matter of interpretation of Jewish law, thus God protected Paul from legal prosecution, which allowed him greater freedom in his ministry. In this age of political correctness, presidential decrees, and the pseudo-laws associated with them, our God is able to work in our circumstances to preserve the freedoms we enjoy in this country, that allow us to openly share our faith. But if God's people are unwilling to take stands, and faithfully share the gospel, and the truth of God's word, we will be overrun, and lose those rights.

It is interesting to note that when the Jews were unsuccessful having Paul arrested, they took their frustration out on one of their own; the synagogue ruler, but the authorities paid no attention to any of it. People do crazy things when they become frustrated. But, because Paul

stood firm, and trusted the Lord, all of that anger was deflected from him, and he was able to continue his ministry in Corinth for a long time.

We too will be blessed in our ministries when we trust the Lord, obey His commands, and boldly stand upon the truth of God's word.