



DECEMBER 5, 2021 | REV. DON MCISSAC

“Encouragement for His People” (Acts 1:1-11)

1 In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach 2 until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. 3 After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. 4 On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. 5 For John baptized with[a] water, but in a few days you will be baptized with[b] the Holy Spirit.”

6 Then they gathered around him and asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”

7 He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. 8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

9 After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

10 They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. 11 “Men of Galilee,” they said, “why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.”

Heavenly Father, Your Word tells us that our hearts are desperately wicked and deceitful above all else and that we can't even know them. You are the One who searches the heart and the mind. And so we ask that You would work in us by Your Spirit, open our hearts and our minds to your truth. teach us from Your Word, sanctify us by Your truth. Your Word is truth. In Jesus' name, amen.

I think I can say with confidence, and that almost everyone here today would agree with me, no one thinks living a faithful and obedient Christian life is easy. If you think that it should be, then God's Word itself will soon put that fantasy to rest. Nowhere in the Bible does it say that following Jesus will be a walk in the park. In fact, Jesus Himself in Matthew 16:24 -27 promises His disciples a life where they will suffer through bearing their crosses, and even though they will find some joy along the way, the real blessings will be found in eternity. Then Jesus said to his disciples, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?”



For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what they have done.

But what He does promise us is that He will be with those who trust Him. This is the promise that comes after the command in Matthew 28:19-20, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

In today's passage we will see God's providential care and his encouragement for those who are in his service, and by that, I mean all Christians.

Let me ask you something so that we can put the passage I just read into its proper perspective.

Have you ever been beaten up because of your faith? Have you ever been whipped, stoned, beaten so badly you were left for dead? Have you ever suffered verbal abuse from neighbours or workmates or classmates?

So far, in his life of service to Christ, Paul has been stoned and left for dead in Lystra and then severely beaten and whipped followed by imprisonment in Philippi. In the past few locations, opposition, both verbal and physical, to the message that Paul brings has seemed to only intensify.

And we will see that here in Acts 18 things have not changed.

Paul enters the city of Corinth where he meets a man, a fellow Jew, named Aquila. Through His providential care God has sent Aquilla and his wife Priscilla to assist Paul as he goes about his ministry in Corinth. We are not told if they were believers when they came to Corinth from Rome. Only that they were expelled from Rome for being Jews and this expulsion would have included most Christians as well, because Christianity was at that time still considered a Jewish sect by most.

At any rate, we later read in this very same chapter that they accompany Paul to Ephesus after his long stay in Corinth. Perhaps Paul had spent his time in Corinth disciplining them after they came to the faith. I think this is a fairly good assumption. We also read in the latter half of this chapter that Paul left them in Ephesus as he travelled back to Antioch. While in Ephesus the couple passed on what they had learned about God to a believer named Apollos. Apollos then went on to Achaia and became an ardent and successful apologist. So, we can see in this whole chapter quite clearly the principle of Spiritual Multiplication through discipleship. This is the principle that Paul later encouraged Timothy to put into practice in his letter to him. In 2 Timothy 2:2, Paul writes, "And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be



qualified to teach others.” This is the same principal that also lies at the heart of COAH’s discipleship school.

After the arrival of Silas and Timothy who Paul had left in Athens, he leaves his tentmaking work with Aquilla and Priscilla and devotes himself full time to preaching and testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ (the Messiah). As he has experienced many times before, his Jewish listeners become abusive. Paul then announces, just as he has done from the beginning of his outreach, that he will turn his attention to the Gentiles. Paul then witnesses two prominent conversions in Titius Justus (a Roman and therefore probably a leading citizen) and Crispus the synagogue ruler (how’s that for a humbling ‘in your face’ conversion to the elders of the Synagogue Paul just left). Also, many Corinthians believe and are baptized.

Of course, we can imagine at this time, the opposition from the Jews and the other citizens of Corinth only increases. But we are not told anything beyond what is written earlier in verse 6. Instead, we read verse 9, “One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: “Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent.” We could rightly conclude that Paul is becoming discouraged to the point of quitting. And that is putting it lightly. In his first letter to this young church in Corinth, Paul reminds them of his physical and mental condition when he first ministered among them. Listen to this, from 1 Corinthians 2: 1-3, “When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling.”

Did you hear that? He was “afraid”. Wow! The Apostle Paul who has been called the greatest missionary and evangelist who has ever lived. Can you imagine, what it would have been like if Paul had quit, stopped witnessing, stopped teaching, out of fear?

When reading the book of Acts we can easily forget that Paul is just human like the rest of us. Even he got discouraged, tired, fearful, and just wanted to curl up into a little ball and disappear.

Listen again to the first words that God spoke to Paul in this vision, “do not be afraid”. We hear those very same words throughout Scripture when people that God has chosen for a task shrink back and start to become anxious and doubtful, or when they see what is before them and lose their resolve, their courage. Think of Abraham in Genesis 15:1 and the assurance he needed as he found that the world was a big and scary place with a lot of people who had more resources and strength than he did. And so, just before God makes His covenant with him this is what God says to him in a vision, “Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.” In much the same way, God also visited Isaac, Jacob, Daniel, Mary, and Peter and many others, both before and after them, with the same message, “Do not be afraid”



Of course, the “do not be afraid” of verse 9 would not be complete without the “For I am with you” of verse 10. God is the One who ultimately guarantees the success of any task. This vision along with his subsequent experiences would later become the basis for Paul’s statement in Romans 8:31, “If God is for us who can be against us”

Of course, before God encourages Paul with the assurance of His presence, He gives him another command, “Keep on speaking, do not be silent” This is another thing that we may find it difficult to believe because it seems to suggest that the apostle Paul was so discouraged and fearful that he was tempted to be silent. Now we need to know that God does not give this command, to keep on speaking, because He needs Paul’s mastery of the Word or his skills as a preacher. No, we need to clearly understand that God gave this command because, it was only through hearing about Jesus that People can come to faith in Him as it tells us in Romans 10:17, “Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ.”

I have experienced that many Christians, myself included, even though they are not afraid to serve are unfortunately, afraid to speak. Maybe they assume that they do not have the required strength or gifts to fulfill the command that the Lord gives to all believers, to make the gospel known. If anything, this passage dispels that notion because despite Paul’s weakness and fear God still commanded Him to “keep on speaking”

But the truth of His presence that God reveals to Paul to encourage him is not the only encouraging truth we find in this verse. God goes on to say that Paul should not fear “because, I have many people in this city”.

Now Paul may have been fearful that he was going to be attacked by those who opposed him. This passage does tell us that they were becoming “abusive” towards him. And God certainly says here that He will prevent those things from taking place. And to be sure God does sometimes prevent his servants from being physically attacked. But that has not always been the case even with Paul as we know in his past and certainly not in his future. But does this phrase mean that God will raise up a large group of people to protect Paul? Some have suggested that by their interpretation of this verse that this is what this phrase, “I have many people in this city” means.

But why, only on this specific occasion, do we have that encouragement of physical protection at the hands of other believers. To me, that reasoning doesn’t make sense. If it was the case that there were already believers in Corinth that God would assemble to come to Paul’s rescue, then why does Paul even need to be there in the first place. I think the more likely interpretation is that God is encouraging Paul by revealing that He is sovereign over everything. Paul was encouraged because he understood that what God was saying is that some people would be saved when he preached the Gospel to them. What this meant



was that there were other people who belonged to Jesus in the city even though they didn't even know it yet. And God was just reminding Paul of this fact.

Perhaps this vision became the basis for Paul's teaching on sovereign election which, when viewed in the light of the rest of Scripture, has come to us through our reformed tradition as Unconditional Election. This is the teaching that God has chosen a people for Himself since before the creation of the world. God did not see anything within them that would prompt Him to choose them. They were not deserving of this honour. This is what the teaching on Total Depravity made very clear to us. That is why we say it was unconditional. It was God's will to elect them. Everything was planned so that the chosen would come to Him and that He would give them as a gift to Christ.

In fact, you will quickly come to realize that rather than be a burden, the reformed teachings on God's Sovereign grace as it relates to salvation are quite comforting and encouraging. What a comfort to know that your eternal salvation or even the salvation of others, your friends, your neighbours, your family members, your sons or daughters or husbands or wives is in no way dependent upon you, and your faithfulness, but upon the strength of the Almighty God, the creator and sustainer of all things. Some cry, "NOT FAIR". But the true definition of fair is, getting what we deserve. I don't think any of us would want that. So, be encouraged and GO!

In fact, the salvation of those God has chosen is guaranteed and it is not even dependent upon their abilities, or faithfulness, or strength, or character. If a person is one of those whom God has chosen to have mercy upon then they will come to him and be saved. That is what we should be praying for those we want to come to saving faith. Not that they would somehow, with their own intellectual capabilities, come to the realization that they are sinners in need of salvation. But that they would be confronted by the Word and drawn to Christ. So, be encouraged and GO!

GO! Because this truth of God's sovereignty in salvation in no way absolves us from our responsibility to proclaim the gospel. For the precise reason that God, through His prophet, Isaiah, has said, "faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ."

And this is precisely what Paul did as verse 11 tells us. He stayed a further 1 and ½ years to teach them the Word of God.

We need to learn from this passage and others that the only way we can keep going and not give up is to view the hardships, the trials, the discouragements we encounter in our lives in light of God's greater plan, which is working everything for our ultimate good and His ultimate glory! What can be more encouraging than that?



Let's pray...

Heavenly Father, we're thankful for Your Word. That through it we see who You really are. And Lord, I pray that we would acknowledge that we have no other hope in this Christian life but that You are with us and You are faithful. I pray that through your Word we would trust You because You are good and gracious and merciful and abounding in steadfast love. And it's because of this that we know You in Christ, in Jesus' name, amen.