

Encouragement for a Weary Church

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[0 : 01] But Paul Brennan is going to be preaching God's Word to us this morning and we're going to be in the book of Acts. So I'd invite you to turn there now with your Bibles and to Acts chapter 18. We've been in and out of the book of Acts quite a bit over the last couple of years with Paul and coming back to it for a little while now and we're going to read together Acts chapter 18.

And Acts is a wonderful book telling us about how the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ went out into all the world without hindrance. The continuing of the acts of the ascended Lord Jesus on the earth through his church.

And this chapter here is a very great encouragement indeed for a weary church. And we certainly need that, don't we, in these present days. So let's read together Acts chapter 18 at verse 1.

After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. And he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome.

And he went to see them. Because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them and worked, for they were tent makers by trade. And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath and tried to persuade Jews and Greeks.

[1 : 28] When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, Paul was occupied with the word, testifying to the Jews that the Christ was Jesus.

When they opposed and reviled him, he shook out his garments and said to them, Your blood be on your own heads. I am innocent. From now on, I will go to the Gentiles.

And he left there and went to the house of a man named Titius Justice, a worshiper of God. His house was next door to the synagogue. Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed in the Lord together with his entire household.

And many of the Corinthians, hearing Paul, believed and were baptized. And the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you. And no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people. And he stayed a year and six months teaching the word of God among them.

[2 : 37] But when Galileo was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews made a united attack on Paul and brought him before the tribunal, saying, This man is persuading people to worship God contrary to the law.

But when Paul was about to open his mouth, Galileo said to the Jews, If it were a matter of wrongdoing or vicious crime, O Jews, I would have reason to accept your complaint. But since it's a matter of questions about words and names and your own law, see to it yourselves.

I refuse to be a judge of these things. And he drove them from the tribunal. And they all seized Sosthenes, the ruler of the synagogue, and beat him in front of the tribunal.

But Galileo paid no attention to any of this. Amen. And may God bless to us his word. Well, good morning.

And please do grab your Bibles at home there and turn to this passage that Willie read for us earlier, Acts chapter 18. And we'll spend a few moments this morning thinking about this encouragement for a weary church.

[3 : 51] If you've got children, get Netflix on next door, distract them, give yourself a bit of peace and quiet for the next wee while. Now, this is a passage to bring encouragement to a weary church, for weary Christians.

I don't know about you, but I feel really rather sapped of energy at the moment, quite drained. Weary in every regard, and not least weary spiritually.

Tempted to hunker down, to bring the head down from the parapet, to take the foot off the gas, not only because of the continuous lockdowns, but also because we're aware of bubbling opposition to the Christian faith, not just here in the UK, but globally, as we think about some of our partners around the world.

It can all get, can't it, quite exhausting. And we do need encouragement. And so it's very striking to read these words spoken by the Lord to the Apostle Paul.

Look down at verses 9 and 10 in our passage. The Lord says, Do not be afraid, but go on speaking, and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you.

[5 : 11] For I have many in this city who are my people. Now to need such words, we must have a rather frightened and weary Apostle Paul on our hands here.

He needed these words as he went around the work of establishing the church there in Corinth. But despite the difficulties, the gospel gains a foothold in new territory.

Many begin to follow Jesus. And Paul spends 18 months, just over 18 months, there in Corinth teaching the word. This passage is an encouragement for a weary church.

For in this passage, we are reminded of God's providence, his promises, and his protection. Now no doubt, the Apostle Paul was tiring by this stage in his journey.

You'll see the very first verse though in chapter 18, that these events happen after Paul had left Athens and gone to Corinth. That in itself was a journey of almost 50 miles by foot.

[6 : 25] And already, Paul had on this journey, setting out from Antioch, been to various places in what we would call Turkey. Derby, Lystra, Troas, and then across into Europe to Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, and Athens.

This has been a long journey for the Apostle Paul. And along the way, he's seen great fruit, huge encouragement, the establishment of new churches, but also opposition and hardship.

He's faced mobs, gone to prison. And now, after all that, he arrives in Corinth. Athens, where he's just come from, would have very much been the cultural capital.

Corinth was more the commercial capital. A city that sat along major trade routes, a melting pot of peoples and cultures. A city known for its hedonism.

It was the Las Vegas of the ancient Mediterranean. And so as Paul arrives into Athens there, into Corinth, sorry, it was probably one of those take a deep breath and jump in.

[7 : 40] There are sorts of moments for Paul as he walked into that city. This is Corinth. Got to gather myself here. Got to gather myself here. And as we see, the hallmarks of his time there were hard work, fierce opposition, run-ins with the authorities, and yet also friendship, gospel progress, real comforts from the Lord.

And this passage is here. Luke, our writer, has put it here to show us that the unstoppable progress of the gospel to the ends of the earth would continue even in places like Corinth.

Even when the Lord's servants are weary and under pressure, the Lord is at work. Be absolutely certain of that. Protecting his people so that they can carry on with that task of witnessing to the ends of the earth, that task he's given to his church.

This passage is here to show us that nothing is going to stop that. And a weary church can be encouraged. And the first reality we're shown for our encouragement here is the reality of God's providence.

Looking at verses 1 to 4. Verses 1 to 4. The workings of God that we're sometimes slow to see. The workings of God we're sometimes slow to see.

[9 : 03] Now we see in these opening verses as Luke records for us those early days of Paul's time in Corinth, that the Lord was at work behind the scenes to make this ministry possible.

He was able to get on with his task. Notice verse 4. He is about the task of witnessing to the fact of Jesus' resurrection. He reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath and tried to persuade Jews and Greeks.

So Paul is getting on with his work. But remember, Paul was by himself when he arrived into Corinth. Usually, Paul would have his ministry team with him.

But not on this occasion. You see, Paul was waiting for Silas and Timothy to catch up with him and help him in the work of proclaiming the gospel. They were last together a few stops back in Berea, back in chapter 17.

And it was there that Paul had to make a very quick exit once the Jews from Thessalonica had tracked him down and had basically run him out of town. Paul had to go. Silas and Timothy stayed.

[10:16] But by the time Paul got to Athens, he had summoned Silas and Timothy to come and join him. But in the meantime, whilst he's waiting for them, he would need support to help him to keep going in the ministry.

He needed the basics that must always be in place if gospel ministry is to go on. The basics of human living. A place to eat. Somewhere to live. meaningful partnership to encourage and help him in his work.

But without Paul and Silas, without Silas and Timothy in this new city, what would Paul do? He's arrived on his own. Well, the solution to that problem had its roots many miles away from Corinth in Rome.

In what would have seemed at the time, very unpromising circumstances. You see, Paul came across two economic migrants.

Or more actually, they were actually asylum seekers, religious refugees. Aquila and his wife Priscilla. They had to leave Italy because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome.

[11:28] There were issues there in Rome and he basically banished the Jews. And Priscilla and Aquila were caught up in that. Religious refugees having to flee and find somewhere else to go.

Now for them, at that time, that would have been a desperately difficult, confusing time. Where will we go? How will we make a living?

What's going on? It would have felt like a disaster, I think, at the time. But even in that difficult situation, the Lord was at work moving his people to be in the right place at the right time.

Now being tent makers, Aquila and Priscilla decide that a good place to set up shop would be in Corinth. It was a busy port town. Lots of through traffic, lots of trade.

And so they decide to head out from Rome for the long journey to Corinth. Now according to Google Maps, when I checked the other day, that would take about a week by foot and boat.

[12:33] And that was today. So back then, that was a major journey, over a thousand kilometers to be kicked out from your home, you're excluded from the city of Rome, and making that long journey to Corinth.

What is going on? I'm sure they would have thought. But once they arrived, they got on with their work. They set them to a way of life. But before too long, Paul comes across them.

And so begins a very fruitful partnership in the gospel. Not just for those initial days in Corinth and those initial weeks of Paul's ministry, but for the long term.

Just look on to verses 18 and 19, just beyond what we read earlier. But when Paul moves on from Corinth with him, verse 18 are Priscilla and Aquila.

They're carrying on, joining with Paul in his future ministry. They are mature and discerning believers, it seems. Look on to verse 26, where they are able to teach the young Apollos and take him aside and explain to him more accurately the ways of God.

[13:47] And Paul often writes about these two believers, these fellow workers in other places, not just partnership intent making, but more significantly in their gospel work. He mentions them at the end of his book of Romans.

He talks about them as fellow workers. And also in his letters to the Corinthian church, he mentions these two people, Aquila and Priscilla. A great partnership is formed.

But when Paul arrived there in Corinth, he had no idea who Aquila and Priscilla were. He didn't know their existence. He found them. And what a wonderful provision this new friendship was going to prove to be.

The Lord and his providence had been at work in places over a thousand kilometers away, bringing disruption, moving people to be in the right place at the right time.

And it was crucial for Paul, particularly in those early days there in Corinth. He was able to find work. He was able to find fellow believers to found deep and lasting friendships that would help him serve him in the gospel for many years to come.

[14:59] And it was that partnership initially that enabled Paul, as we see in verse 4, to actually get about that work of going to the synagogue each week and proclaiming the gospel.

Without this partnership with Priscilla and Aquila, he couldn't have done that. Three people, drawn together from across the Mediterranean by the invisible hand of God.

That is how the Lord often works, isn't it? Unseen to us. Often unnoticed until we later reflect upon what's happened.

Things at which at the time seemed like utter disasters. Actually in the Lord's perfect plans and perfect timing served his greater plans to advance the gospel, to bring salvation to those who are lost.

And that was surely the case, wasn't it, for Aquila and Priscilla and Paul. God had always known what he intended to do there in Corinth.

[16:01] He always knew what the outcome would be. But to them at the time, they had no idea. And surely that's the case for us now. The Lord is always at work.

He is always bringing about his perfect plans to fruition. All that's going on in our nation at the moment. In our church life. In our personal lives. It seems in many ways, doesn't it, to be an absolute disaster.

What is going on? But the Lord is at work. And we will, if not in this life, certainly the next, we will see what the Lord was doing.

We'll see why things happened the way they did. It's just that we're often so slow to see it, aren't we? We can be very slow to see how the Lord is working.

But even in the midst of perplexity and difficulty, we're not only to trust the Lord, to trust his providence, but we are to work hard, get on with it.

[17:08] That's what Paul did there in Corinth. The Lord had been working to bring about this meeting of these people, this fruitful partnership. But when Paul found these two tent makers, he got to work.

He rolled up his sleeves, earned his way. earning a living and taking the opportunities that would come in the synagogue. Whatever it took, Paul was eager to serve the gospel.

And when the troops arrive in verse 5 in the forms of Silas and Timothy, Paul is then freed up to fully give himself to the work of testifying to the Jews that the Christ was Jesus.

The Lord's wonderful providence at work, behind the scenes, to enable the gospel to flourish. But as was and is always the case, the witness to the gospel that Paul was freed up to do brings opposition.

That's what we see there in verses 5 to 11. It's in the midst of this latest round of opposition that the Lord, in his mercy and in his tenderness, speaks these wonderful words of promise to Paul.

[18:21] This is the second great encouragement we see in this passage. We see in the wonderful providence of God, but we also see the promises of God. The promises of God that we need to hear. The promises of God we need to hear.

Now things get pretty messy and really quite difficult for Paul following the arrival of Silas and Timothy. Because of the support they're able to bring to him, he's freed up from his tent making and he gives himself to the work of testifying to the news of Jesus Christ.

He's able to give himself full time to that. But the Jews there in Corinth, look at verse 5, they oppose and they revile Paul. They don't want to hear it.

And Paul's response is perhaps really quite shocking at first glance. Look at what he says or what he does.

There in verse 6, when they opposed and reviled him, he shook out his garments and said to them, your blood be on your own heads. I am innocent. From now on, I will go to the Gentiles.

[19:34] Now, this shaking out of the garments that is mentioned here, it was a symbolic way of breaking off relations with people.

I want nothing more to do with you. I'm done. It's a pretty dramatic, visual, definitive moment for Paul there in that synagogue in Corinth. And the language he uses here would not have been lost on those in the synagogue.

Paul, by declaring himself to be innocent of their coming punishment, he was indicating that he had acted like the faithful watchman described in Ezekiel chapter 33.

Let me read to you a few verses from that chapter in Ezekiel which Paul is alluding to here as he speaks to these Jews. Here's what it said. The word of the Lord came to me.

Son of man, speak to your people and say to them, if I bring the sword upon a land and the people of the land take a man from among them and make him their watchman and if he sees the sword coming upon the land and blows the trumpet and warns the people, then if anyone who hears the sound of the trumpet does not take the warning and if the sword comes and takes him away, his blood shall be upon his own head.

[20 : 59] He heard the sound of the trumpet and did not take the warning. His blood shall be upon himself. But if he had taken warning, he would have saved his life.

But if the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet so that the people are not warned and the sword comes and takes any one of them, that person is taken away in his iniquity but his blood I will require at the watchman's hand.

Do you see what Paul is saying as he refers to that passage from Ezekiel which they all would have known and read? Paul is saying, I've done my duty. I've seen the sword coming.

I've blown the trumpet. I have warned you. I have proclaimed the gospel to you but you have rejected it. That is your choice. I am no longer responsible for you.

Your blood, dear friends, shall be on your own heads. No pleasure would have been taken by Paul in saying this.

[22 : 05] Quite the opposite. Tears would likely have been in his eyes as he spoke these words. It's very sobering. But there comes a point when people take a firm decision to reject the gospel and it's just no good to keep going on at them.

They have firmly rejected the gospel. For Paul, there are others who need to hear the message. And so he turns to the Gentiles in Corinth.

In fact, look at verse 7. He moves next door. Now that takes some guts, doesn't it?

That would not be easy. It wasn't as if he was going to the other side of town. He's had a bit of a bust up there in the synagogue and rather going to the other side, he's going right next door. He was going to bump into these folk regularly, wasn't he?

Those Jews, he's just shaken off his garments at. He was going to see them in the market walking into the synagogue. That would have been really pretty hard for Paul, don't you think?

[23 : 15] To have to see these people frequently. But the Lord in his tenderness brings real and vital encouragement for the bruised and weary apostle.

Look at what happens next. First, there are conversions. the very ruler of the synagogue himself believes in the Lord. It's extraordinary.

Verse 8, Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue believed in the Lord together with his entire household. What an encouragement that would have been to Paul and Silas and Timothy and Priscilla and Aquila.

The very synagogue that rejected Paul, one of the leaders himself comes to faith. Isn't that wonderful? Look on to the end of that verse. Many of the Corinthians hearing Paul believed and were baptized.

There's new life. Many are turning from darkness and death to light and eternal life. That makes all the hardship, all the effort, all the opposition worth it, doesn't it?

[24 : 26] Hearing a folk coming to a living faith, that would have boosted Paul and his team hugely as it does us. Hearing about conversions, hearing about people who've been reading the word one-to-one, coming to faith, hearing about people who've been tuning into our services this past year, coming to living faith, hearing about those who've been coming to life and Christianity explored and discipleship explored and coming to faith and growing in faith.

That's what we're about. And it's wonderful to hear that news. It keeps us going, doesn't it? You see, here's the reality, folks. Eternal destinies are being forged in our midst.

Even this morning, in the seemingly routine, mundane stuff we do week to week, eternal destinies are being formed. That's what we're about.

We minister, we preach, we give ourselves, we invite, we pray with eternity's values in view so that Christ may be praised. That is what we're about as a church.

And it's so encouraging, isn't it, when the Lord gives us those little tokens of his goodness and faithfulness, when we see new life before our eyes.

[25 : 48] And so it was for Paul, the leader of the synagogue, many others coming, to a living faith. But it wasn't only conversions. The Lord spoke tender words, words that Paul needed to hear in the midst of hardship, words of promise, verses 9 and 10.

The Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, Do not be afraid, but go on speaking. Do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people.

people. The Lord speaks the promises so that Paul will not be afraid and will go on speaking. And it does the trick, doesn't it?

Verse 11, he stayed a whole year and six months teaching the word of God among them. a very effective word from the Lord and one that we would do well to understand and digest so that it enables us and equips us to likewise be unafraid and to keep going in speaking the word of the Lord.

Three particular promises here which the Lord speaks to Paul which achieve that aim. Three promises which enable him to keep going, to keep speaking.

[27 : 21] And the first promise is the promise of presence. The Lord says to Paul, I am with you. I'm with you.

There can be no greater word of reassurance to God's children than that, can there? To know that the Lord is with you. To have the creator and Lord of the universe promise his presence with you. There is no greater promise that he can make. Now this is not new information for Paul nor is it new information for you here this morning if you're a follower of Christ.

Jesus' last words to his disciples recorded by Matthew would have been known to Paul where the Lord says, behold, I am with you always to the end of the age. This is not new information but we do need to hear it, don't we?

As Paul did, we need to be reminded of this great reality. He must have been at quite the low point to need this extraordinary revelation. indication of the strain, the struggle, the stress that were upon him at this time.

[28 : 40] Perhaps it was what he was observing around him in that city there in Corinth, seeing the realities of sin and the lostness there in Corinth. It would have brought even Paul, so usually dauntless in his spirit, to the point of despair, filled with fear and foreboding.

He needed to hear this word from the Lord. Perhaps it was just that continuing, ongoing, wearing down of opposition yet again, bringing him to the point of weariness, the cost of his ministry yet again coming upon him.

Whatever the true thoughts and feelings of Paul, these words from the Lord were just what he needed to hear. And perhaps it's just what many of us need to hear this morning.

January is a tough enough month as it is, let alone all the additional stresses and strains and restrictions that we're enduring. The despair we may feel as we look out on our city, on our world. We're often filled, aren't we, with fear and foreboding. But know this, God is with you.

[29 : 57] that is a promise for Paul and for you this morning. It has been God's promise for his people down through the generations.

He says, I will never leave you. I will never forsake you. You are mine. God's promise of presence. The second promise is one of protection.

I am with you, says the Lord, and no one will attack you to harm you. Now, Paul has faced Jewish opposition before and risked his life.

And he's perhaps fearing that threats on his life might be made here in Corinth too. But the Lord reassures him that will not be the case. It is a promise that is specific to Paul and to that time and location.

And it's a promise that is, of course, kept for his time in Corinth, as we'll see in a moment. But it is also a general truth for God's people in all places at all times.

[31 : 00] We are safe forever with him. He will protect us for all eternity. Nothing will separate us from him, from his care. Just read Romans chapter 8, which does not mean that trials won't come.

They will. It didn't mean that trials would never come again for Paul. They did. But we do know that the only protection that ultimately counts, protection through the valley of the shadow of death and into eternity is guaranteed.

If you belong to Christ, nothing will get you in the end. For all eternity, you're safe. And that is the promise of protection that we need to hear again and again.

Which is not to say that it's the only protection that we have. Sometimes the Lord, often the Lord does, in his mercy give us protection here and now. But we can't expect or demand it, as Paul didn't.

But the Lord in his grace tells him here, in Corinth you will not be harmed. And that enabled him to get on with this task, didn't it?

[32 : 16] So promises of presence and protection, but also promises of providential care. promises of providential care. The promise of protection given to Paul would be assured through God's providential care.

Look again at verse 10. It says, For I am with you, no one will attack to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people. Paul's heart must have rejoiced as he was renewed and reinforced in his work by the knowledge of the circumstances around him, God had many in that city, many who were his people.

People who were at that time walking in darkness, but destined ultimately to be called into light, to be called by Paul's own gospel ministry, called into eternal life.

You see, the Lord had prepared a harvest for Paul. As he sowed the gospel word, he would reap the harvest there in Corinth. he would have the privilege of seeing before his eyes many coming to living faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The result of these wonderful words of promise from the Lord was that Paul was able to keep going. He continued there for a further 18 months, verse 11, following this word from the Lord, teaching the word of God, being reassured of God's presence, his protection, his providential care.

[33 : 57] But then we hit a bump in the road. Look at verse 12. But when Galileo was pro-consul of Achaia, the Jews made a united attack on Paul and brought him before the tribunal.

But here is where we see the realization of the promise God made to Paul some 18 months earlier. The Lord protects Paul and so his ministry can continue.

So here's our third and final point. We've seen God's providence, we've seen his promises, but also his protection. And we see here the sovereign power of God that we sometimes doubt.

if you're like me, then you will sometimes wonder, what on earth is going on? Is God really in control and sovereign over all things?

And Paul would have been forgiven if similar thoughts crossed his mind when the events recorded in verses 12 to 17 occurred. The Jews unite and they try to create significant trouble for Paul.

[35 : 11] They go to the top, they go to the pro-consul, the Roman governor, who had jurisdiction over the whole province. This wasn't just a city magistrate.

This was serious business and could have meant real trouble for Paul. It could have meant the end of his ministry in that whole province. It was a very critical situation, it was a strategic moment for the gospel and its progress.

But the Lord was with Paul as he had indicated by the vision. And he moved Gallio to resist the Jews' pressure, to see through their plotting, and he wants absolutely nothing to do with the whole thing.

He doesn't want to get dragged into it. This is a matter for you guys to deal with. If it's a criminal matter, fine. But this is some sort of inter-religious matter. Over to you, I don't want to get involved. And as we see, the Lord does, in his sovereign power, totally turn the tables on Paul's opponents here.

And rather than him being roughed up by the mob, it's the leader of the synagogue himself, at the end of our passage, verse 17, who is attracting the opposition. The anti-Semitism that seems to have been bubbling away sort of comes to the surface here.

[36 : 35] And they drag out the leader of the synagogue, and they beat him up in front of Galio. But he wants nothing to do with it either. Doesn't say very much for him. But regardless, Paul is enabled and free to keep on going with his ministry.

There's no trouble from the authorities. The Jews plots come to nothing. They're turned on its head. And the apostle is able to carry on. And as one preacher I was reading this week put it, the tables were completely turned upon them.

And this is always liable to happen when men go too far in their resistance against the gospel.

When God chooses to assert his sovereignty, there are no half measures with him.

The tables are utterly turned. Paul is free to go and to crack on with his ministry. And that was at the time a great comfort for Paul.

To know God's promises were enduring, were trustworthy, and that he could keep doing what he was doing. To know that God is on his throne and he is still today.

[37 : 52] He is ensuring that those who he intends to hear the gospel word and turn to him will hear it and will turn. Nothing will stop that. God had his people in Corinth.

He knew those who were his. The Jews couldn't stop it. Galio played into its hands. Nothing will stop what God intends for his gospel and the progress of his church.

So we may be weary, as I think the apostle Paul was here. But remember, remember his unseen work, his wonderful and perfect providence.

Hear his unchanging promises of presence and protection. And don't ever forget or doubt his unmatched power. These are words to encourage a weary church this morning. And let me close with words that we'll sing in just a moment in our closing hymn. Since Jesus is with you, do not be afraid.

[39 : 03] Since he is your God, you need not be dismayed. He'll strengthen you, guard you, and help you to stand upheld by his righteous omnipotent hands.

That is our God. Let's pray. Father, we do thank you for your great words of promise to us. We thank you for your encouragements when we are feeling weary.

Would you please help us this morning to trust you and to know in the most real way that we can that you are with us. you are in our midst as a church, as individuals, and that you do promise to never leave nor forsake us.

So, Lord, lift our drooping heads, encourage our weary hearts, and enable us to go on speaking because your gospel, it is your gospel alone that people really need to hear because it eternal destinies are at stake.

Help us, we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.