

Setbacks and Encouragements

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[0 : 0 0] Good afternoon, friends, and a very warm welcome to the Tron for our Wednesday lunchtime Bible talk. Very good to see you all here, as always. Let's bow our heads together now for some moments of further prayer.

Our gracious Lord Jesus, we think of you indeed as the rock, the rock of ages, and indeed the rock who was split or cleft for us. We think of the way, Lord Jesus, in which you have loved the world and loved your people so much that you were prepared to take that long, difficult journey.

You left the courts of heaven and the beauty of everything there, the immediate presence of your Father. You left it all behind and you came to earth for our sake.

You were willing to be born as a little one. To grow up in an ordinary town. To work, to labor in the carpenter's workshop.

You were willing, Lord Jesus, to walk the dusty streets of Israel and Jerusalem and the villages and the countryside, preaching and teaching, telling people about the kingdom of God and indeed telling them that you are the king sent by God himself.

[1 : 1 9] And then we think of the longest and hardest journey when you set your face towards Jerusalem and were willing to go to a cross to die that most humble, lowly, horrible death so that our sins might be taken in your body and the penalty of them borne by you and our sins truly and finally dealt with.

How we thank you, Lord Jesus. And we pray that you will fill our hearts afresh today with gratitude to you because you have done all this for us.

And we ask it for your dear name's sake. Amen. Amen. Well, let's take our Bibles and turn to the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 18.

We're working our way through this chapter over four Wednesdays and this is the second of our studies and the passage I particularly want us to look at today is verses 5 to 17.

But I'll read the whole of the passage from verse 1 to verse 17 to give us a little bit more context. Paul the Apostle is on his second missionary journey.

[2 : 3 2] He's recently been in Athens, as you can see in verse 1 and he now comes to the commercial city, the great city of Corinth. So 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 Paul went to see them and 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.

When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, Paul was occupied with the word, testifying to the Jews that the Christ was Jesus. And 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 Justus, 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.

[3 : 56] 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.

But when Gallio 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, Gallio 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 is 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.

[4 : 58] And they all seized Sosthenes, the ruler of the synagogue, and beat him in front of the tribunal. But Gallio paid no attention to any of this.

Amen. Well, now I made the point last week that Luke the Evangelist, who is the author of the Acts of the Apostles, is not simply writing a bare history of events.

He is giving to the reader a highly selective account of the first 30 years of the Christian church because he wants to present Christianity and the gospel from a specific angle.

Luke is not just an unbiased chronicler. He has a message. In fact, he is as much Luke the Evangelist in this second book of his as he is in his first book, the Gospel of Luke.

The Acts of the Apostles is an evangelistic tract just as much as the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. You might say this book is as full of the gospel as a sardine tin is full of sardines.

[6 : 02] Luke is wanting the reader to believe the gospel, and that's why this book of Acts is full of evangelistic sermons as well as the accounts of the missionary work of Peter and Paul. This is very much a gospel book.

But as well as preaching the gospel, Luke is also wanting to commend the gospel. He's wanting to say to the reader, this gospel and the church that it's bringing into being is sound.

It's God-given. It's true. It's trustworthy. It's not just some fad or flash in the pan. This is true truth. This is eternal truth. This is the most important thing that the world has ever known.

Now, let's not forget just how new the gospel was at this point when Luke was writing this book. Jesus had ascended into heaven only some 20 or 30 years previously.

It was very new. Now, for us, it's so different. We're used to this knowledge of the great length of history of 2,000 years. of wonderful church history. But it wasn't like that when Luke and Paul were living.

[7 : 07] And remember, this gospel was causing an enormous stir. It had taken the Mediterranean world by storm. The growth of Christianity was extraordinarily rapid.

By about 60 AD, there were churches in Italy, in Greece, right up into what we now call Serbia and Croatia. Paul writes in Romans chapter 16 of how he had preached the gospel all the way around up into Illyricum, which is what we used to call Yugoslavia.

And there were churches in many parts of Turkey, in Syria, in Israel, of course, and right down into North Africa. In fact, in this very chapter, at verse 24, we meet the preacher Apollos, who was from Alexandria in Egypt, not far from Cairo.

So everybody was talking about Christianity. Many thousands of people had become Christians by this stage. But, while many had embraced the gospel, many opposed it.

And this is why, in this book of Acts, Luke is commending the gospel, at times defending it against its detractors. He's saying to the thoughtful reader, this truth is to be respected.

[8 : 19] Those who attack it are wrong. They may think it's a threat, perhaps even a threat to the law and order and stability of the Roman Empire. But it's not. It's peaceable.

It brings good order. And it should be not only tolerated, but welcomed. Not like the 21st century ISIS, which is brutal and destructive. No, this gospel is entirely a source of peace and good behavior.

That's what Luke is saying. So Luke is preaching the gospel, but he's also commending and defending the gospel. Let's see how he does this in our passage for today, verses 5 to 17.

Luke, in this section, commends, first, Paul, second, the Lord Jesus, and third, the authority of Rome. And in all these ways, Luke has a lot to teach us.

So we'll take it under three headings, in three sections. First, it is good for the evangelist to be resilient. Now we left Paul, if you were here last week, you remember we left him in verse 4.

[9 : 23] Just look with me at verse 4. He was reasoning there in Corinth, in the synagogue, every Sabbath, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks. But there's a change of pace as we turn into verse 5.

In verse 4, he was speaking every Sabbath, only one day a week, because for the rest of the time, he was having to make tents with his new friends, Aquila and Priscilla, because he had to earn a living at that stage to support himself.

But look at verse 5. When Silas and Timothy arrive from Macedonia, and if you just look back a page to chapter 17, verse 15, you'll see that Paul commands Silas and Timothy to come to him as soon as possible.

Well, here we are at chapter 18, verse 5, and they've caught up with him. So they arrive, and the implication is that they've brought money, they've brought funds with them, which means that Paul can now start to preach the gospel every day of the week.

And that's what Luke means by Paul being occupied with the word. No longer occupied with tents, but occupied with the word. And look at what he's doing. Verse 5, testifying to the Jews that the Christ was Jesus.

[10 : 40] That's the heart of his message to the Jews. Now that was always, and still is today, the crucial question for Jewish people. Jewish people have always believed in a Christ, a Christ to come.

The Hebrew scriptures speak of a king of David's line who is expected. But the question for the Jew is, is Jesus, can Jesus be, the Christ of Old Testament expectation?

That's the sticking point for the Jew. If ever we befriend and evangelize Jewish people, that's the question which has to be addressed sooner or later. We sometimes hear of meetings being arranged between Christian bodies and Jewish groups.

But those meetings, usually, the last question at those meetings to be addressed is the question of the identity of Jesus. But in the end, it's the only important question.

Look on to the last verse of this chapter, verse 28, which speaks about the preaching of Apollos, who, like Paul, was a Jewish Christian. And Luke says there at the very end that he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the scriptures that the Christ was Jesus.

[11 : 52] Now that was the issue. And it was that issue that led in verse 6 of our chapter to many of the Jews not only opposing Paul, but reviling him.

That's one thing to oppose a person with reasoned arguments. But reviling and insulting, that's a different thing. It turns the heat up a great deal. So see how Paul responds in verse 6.

He shakes out his garments. It's a symbolic gesture of dissociating himself from the Jews. And he says to them, your blood be on your own heads. I am innocent.

In other words, when you find yourselves on the day of judgment, condemned by God to perdition, you must take responsibility for your own ruin. I'm innocent. I've brought you the good news of Jesus, but you've deliberately rejected it.

It's a very strong thing for him to say. But the evangelist does need to say that kind of thing sometimes in the hope of jolting people into realizing that to reject Jesus has eternal consequences.

[12 : 54] But notice what Paul says next to these Jews here in verse 6. From now on, he says, I will go to the Gentiles. And for a Jew to say that to fellow Jews in a synagogue was a bit like launching a thunderbolt.

The Gentiles, in Jewish thought, were dogs. They were outsiders. They were beyond the pale. For Paul to say that he was now taking his message to the Gentiles sounded to the Jew like treachery and treason.

Perhaps you turn over with me just a few pages to chapter 22 in the Acts of the Apostles. And we'll just see this whole business in action a bit more. In chapter 22, Paul finds himself in another very tense and fraught situation.

He's now in Jerusalem. And a mob there, a Jewish mob, has been baying for his blood. But he's protected by the tribune. That's the senior Roman officer in Jerusalem.

And he's now allowed by the tribune to make a public speech to the hostile crowd, a speech in self-defense. And you'll see he begins in verse 1, 22.1.

[14 : 05] Brothers and fathers, it's a very respectful way of addressing the Jews, hear the defense that I now make before you. And when they heard that he was addressing them in the Hebrew language, they became even more quiet.

So they were listening very carefully. He then tells them the story of his conversion on the road to Damascus, ending with a conversation that he had with the Lord Jesus in verses 17 to 21.

And in that little section, Jesus says to him, and this happened just after Paul was converted, so it's 20 or so years before, but Jesus says to him, get away from Jerusalem because the people of Jerusalem will not accept your testimony about me.

And then Jesus said to him in verse 21, go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles. Now look at verse 22. Up to this word, that's the word Gentiles, this Jewish crowd listened to him.

But then when they heard that word, they raised their voices and they said, away with such a fellow from the earth. He should not be allowed to live. They're angry to the point of murder when Paul tells them that Jesus had sent him to the Gentiles.

[15 : 16] Light the blue touch paper. Now here we are in 50-something AD, and the idea that the man alleged by Paul to be the Christ should seek to include Gentiles in the salvation purposes of the God of Israel, such an idea was anathema to the Jewish mob.

Paul would have been lynched within moments if he hadn't been protected by the Roman authorities at this point in Acts 22. But this was what the Lord Jesus was asking Paul to do, to take the gospel to the Gentiles.

He became the apostle to the Gentiles. The gospel is for the world, not just for Israel. Now I imagine that almost all of us here today are Gentiles. If there are some Jewish folk here, you're very welcome.

We're glad to have you here, but I'm sure that most of us are Gentiles. If the first century Jews had read their Old Testaments properly, they would have known that it was always God's intention to include Gentiles.

God said clearly to Abraham when he called him to be the father of the chosen nation. He said, through you, Abraham, all the families of the earth shall be blessed. And God's intention to include Gentiles in salvation is reiterated countless times.

[16 : 35] In the law of Moses, the Psalms, and the Old Testament prophets. Now let's look back to chapter 18 and verse 7. And we'll just see how resilient Paul is in the face of this Jewish attack.

So here is verse 7. And he left there, in other words, he left the synagogue in Corinth, and went to the house of a man named Titius Justus, a worshiper of God. His house was next door to the synagogue.

Next door! Next door! At this house of Titius Justus. Now Luke describes this man as a worshiper of God, which means almost certainly that he was a Gentile who had been attending synagogue worship for some time.

But to set up your new base of operations next door was remarkably bold. You can think of people attending the new Christian meeting coming into the front door of Titius Justus' house.

They would have had to pass the front door of the synagogue on their way in. Hello Mrs. Jacobs, says a big fellow at the synagogue door. And where are you going today, might I ask.

[17 : 42] Oh, I'm just popping into Mr. Justus' house just for a moment, just for a cup of tea and for some Bible study. The atmosphere would have been electric.

Wouldn't it? And dangerous. But Paul did it. He knew that he was God's appointed apostle to bring the truth of Christ to the Gentiles. The Lord Jesus had made it absolutely plain to him when he was converted and came into Damascus some 20 years previously.

And I think we can say with certainty that we would not be here today in this place doing what we're doing if Paul had not stuck like a limpet to the task of bringing the gospel to the Gentiles, people like us.

Jesus opened the way from earth to heaven but Paul by his command opened the way for the gospel to speed right through to the ends of the earth including Glasgow.

Isn't it good then for the evangelist to be resilient? Now secondly it's wonderful for the Lord to be so encouraging.

[18 : 51] Paul's resilience was very great but not limitless. Look at what happens next. In verse 8 Crispus who is the ruler of the synagogue believes in Jesus along with his entire household and many other Corinthians who believe and are baptized.

So it's more or less revival breaking out in Corinth. But now look at verse 9 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.

Paul is clearly very hard pressed at this point. There's revival breaking out. Lots of the Corinthians are turning to Christ and becoming Christians. And the hostile opposition to Paul and the gospel is obviously increasing every day and Paul is tempted verse 9 he's tempted to be afraid to stop speaking to become silent.

And the Lord Jesus of course knows how severely Paul is being tempted to pull the plug on the Corinthian mission and head off elsewhere. So he comes to him in a vision by night the same Lord who had spoken to Paul in a great vision on the Damascus Road 20 years before.

And he says to Paul don't be afraid go on speaking don't be silent. And he then gives Paul the sweetest reassurance for I am with you he says and no one will attack you to harm you for I have many in this city who are my people.

[20 : 28] Now that last phrase really means there are many in Corinth who will be Christians soon. they are my people in the sense that I've marked them for my kingdom.

But they're going to hear the gospel from you Paul. So keep on speaking and be assured I am with you every inch of the way. Now that must have been a wonderful moment for Paul to know that Jesus was with him despite all the opposition and insults that he was receiving.

And it was that message of comfort received in the night that kept him going for another 18 months in Corinth as verse 11 tells us. Paul tells us more about what he went through in one of the letters that he wrote to the Corinthians a few years later.

He writes this in 1 Corinthians chapter 2 referring back to his initial visit to Corinth. He says I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom.

In other words I wasn't like one of your great Greek orators. I wasn't a powerful speaker. In fact I was so much intimidated by fierce opposition that I trembled as I spoke. I shook.

[21 : 44] It's not the way we usually think about Paul is it? We tend to think of him as impervious to fear dauntless and forging ahead without a moment's hesitation. But he was a sensitive human being and he didn't enjoy opposition and insult any more than you or I would.

I think verse 9 shows us that he was on the brink of giving up at Corinth. He was on the brink of throwing in the towel. Jesus knew this and he gave him the assurance that he needed at that time of great trial.

Don't be afraid I am with you. That's what God is like. How often he expresses just that thought in the Bible to his people.

Think of Jesus speaking to the 11 apostles at the end of Matthew's gospel just before the ascension. He sends them out to preach the gospel and he says I am with you always even to the end of the age.

Or in a rather different context think of Psalm 23. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil for you are with me.

[22 : 53] The heart of the gospel is expressed in Jesus' name Emmanuel God with us. So here was Paul in great difficulty. He was risking his neck for the sake of the gospel and just at his moment of great need the Lord Jesus speaks to him.

And look at what else he says in verse 10. I'm with you and no one will attack you to harm you. Look on to verse 12 and you'll see how a little bit later the Jews at Corinth made a united attack on Paul but they weren't able to harm him.

So Jesus wasn't promising in verse 10 that Paul would not be attacked but he was promising that he wouldn't be harmed. Well so far we have a resilient evangelist then a wonderfully encouraging Lord Jesus and now thirdly it is preferable for the government to be neutral.

and here we're in verses 12 to 17 a paragraph which can easily be misunderstood. Luke's message in this paragraph is that the church and the gospel are not a threat to the Roman authority and also that the Roman authority has no need to threaten the church and the gospel.

In short church and state can happily coexist. Now I say this paragraph can be misunderstood because it has sometimes been thought that Gallio who's the Roman proconsul is endorsing and supporting the attack made in verse 17 on the Christian Sosthenes.

[24 : 29] But that's not what Luke is saying here. The attack on Paul as verse 12 makes clear comes not from the Roman people but from the Jews of Corinth. It's the Jews who bring Paul to the tribunal to court and the case they present is that Paul's activity are in some way anti-Roman.

They say this man verse 13 this man is persuading people to worship God contrary to the law. But Gallio very quickly dismisses the case even before Paul has a chance to open his mouth.

He says to the Jews this is not a matter for the Roman court. This man is no law-breaking criminal as far as I'm concerned. This is an in-house Jewish matter about understanding your Bible.

sort this out yourselves and he drives them out of the courtroom. Luke's point gospel preaching breaks no law of the Roman Empire and does not threaten law and order and Luke wants the reader of his book to be reassured that to be a Christian and a gospel worker sits very happily with the best interests of the state and the nation.

Now this is always a very important point. Over the last 20 centuries governments have varied enormously in their view of the church and the gospel. Some have welcomed Christianity strongly and have sought to embody Christian ethics in the laws of the land.

[25 : 58] Others have persecuted the church fiercely and yet others and there are quite a few like this today have professed to support freedom of religion but their outward profession has not been matched by their actual practice.

Think of our country today. We're witnessing very profound changes. England and Scotland still professed to be Christian states at a formal level but both social trends and actual legislation tell a different story.

Our last two prime ministers David Cameron and Theresa May have both spoken up publicly in support of Christian freedoms but the actual legislation passed by their governments has at times denied Christian ethics.

The worst example has been the Cameron government's legalization of same-sex marriage which of course deeply undermines the Bible's teaching on sex and marriage. In fact it's impossible now for any senior party leader to speak out against same-sex activity as we know from Tim Farron's recent fall.

He's an evangelical Christian and his commitment to Christian ethics has ruled him out of power in his party. The political establishment won't tolerate that kind of Christian ethic anymore.

[27 : 19] So let's be encouraged by our friend the doctor Dr. Luke. He's saying to us it is good for the evangelist to be resilient. So let's pray for our evangelists.

It's wonderful for the Lord to be so encouraging as he always is. So let's thank the Lord for all his great encouragements. And it's preferable for the government to be neutral.

So let's pray that our politicians today will increasingly see the idolatries of modern society and return to the ethics of the gospel which so greatly blesses the nation that embraces it.

But to turn away from the gospel in social morality and legislation can only produce a harvest of corruption. let's bow our heads and we'll pray.

We thank you dear heavenly father for the wonderful progress of the gospel throughout the acts of the apostles and the remarkable progress of the gospel throughout the world in 20 centuries.

[28 : 24] we know dear father that it will often be and is often resisted and opposed and those who hold it are sometimes insulted and reviled and worse. But we pray that you will help us and churches up and down our country to hold firm and true not only to the gospel but to the ethical teaching of the gospel.

We pray for our politicians especially and ask that you will help them to see sense increasingly. and we pray for Christians who are in Parliament both in Holyrood and at Westminster and ask that you will give them a voice that is increasingly heard and respected.

But please dear father keep us firm so that we may bear a firm true and bright and good witness to the truth about Jesus Christ and we ask it in his name.

Amen.